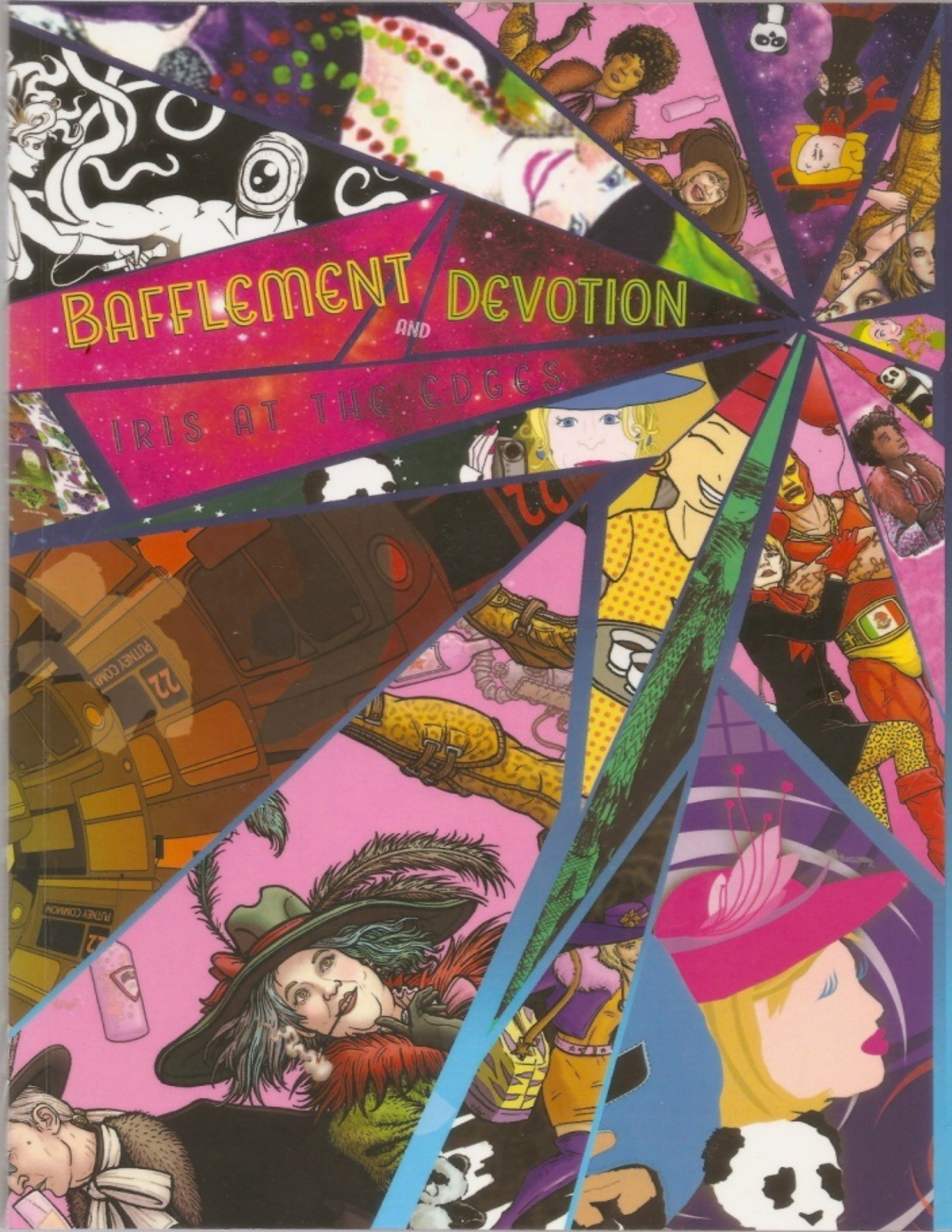
BAFFLEMENT AND DEVOTION
IRIS AT THE EDGES

Bafflement and Devotion:
Iris at the Edges

The Changing Face of Iris Wildthyme.

I never look a day older, do I? Go on, tell me, be honest. I haven't changed a bit, have I, chuck? Have I?!? Ooh, what?! Well, you'd look older if you'd lived the life I have, and been through what I have. So just you think on. I look fabulous, actually. Everyone says so.

BAFFLEMENT AND DEVOTION: IRIS AT THE EDGES

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Iris Wildthyme and Panda appear courtesy of Paul Magrs.

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Project Muyembe

Every child has the right to an education, whatever their financial background, gender, or ethnicity. Yet, every year in Kayenje (a small rural village in Uganda) almost one third of the P7 students don't go on to secondary school. The Ugandan government does fund primary education for all children; however, the high cost of secondary school and further education fees mean that for many children their education will stop at just 12 years old.

Without the opportunity to learn, children can't develop to their full potential. They are more likely to be trapped in cycles of poverty, poor health, and early marriage. That is why at Project Muyembe we work tirelessly to provide scholarships to these children who otherwise could not achieve their dreams of becoming teachers, nurses, or engineers.

Our scholarships support students for 6 years in total. We fund 4 years of secondary education to ensure they graduate with O- levels. We then continue to support them through a college diploma of their choice. These diplomas take 2 years and will ensure our students can leave education with the skills, confidence, and knowledge to pursue successful careers. It is important to us that our students have the best possible chance of gaining employment locally, which in turn boosts the local community in Kayenje. That is why we focus on college diplomas, which have proven to be more employable in Uganda than their more expensive University level counterparts.

We provide all students on our programme with school supplies, uniform, and school lunches for the year. Their school lunch consists of rice, beans, and cabbage. We decided to include this as part of the programme because for most of our students this is the only substantial meal they will receive.

The value of partnership is at the heart of Project Muyembe. We work closely with the teachers at Kayenje secondary school and the Parent-Teacher council at Kayenje Primary to ensure a fair application process for the scholarship. Both the students financial background and recommendations from their teachers - based on grades and work ethic- are considered.

The idea for our charity was also born out of partnership. A mutual feeling of helplessness between a Ugandan teacher and a Scottish volunteer. Together, as they sat under the Mango Tree in Kayenje Primary's playground, they created Project Muyembe. A charity that would do charity differently. No more money

being spent funding underqualified volunteers who would gain more than they could give. No more ‘sponsor-a-child’ schemes that provoke harmful saviour stereotypes. No more only 10% of donations reaching where they are supposed to reach. No more students in Kayenje feeling as though they cannot achieve their dreams. Just simply volunteers from around the world, fundraising as much as we can, to provide scholarships and positively impact on the lives of students in Kayenje.

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Mark "Flummoxed” Manley
Mark "Missed” Michalowski
Cody "Vexed" Schell

And a big thank you to a few special devoted *Iris at the Edges* artists.

Johannes Chazot
Zal Cryptid
WHOXLEY - William Oxley

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Bafflement And Devotion

Paul Magrs

Whatever she says, she first met him on the desert world Hyspero, while he was in his Eighth incarnation, and they all got mixed up in the devilish shenanigans of the Scarlet Empress[1]. Somehow, he recognised her. She convinced him—this addle-pated woman, tough as old boots—that they had known each other for centuries and had met many, many times before.

No. It was before that. In eighteenth century England, when he was Doctor number four. Tom Baker. She'd dragged him into Jane Austen's world; tugged him deftly by the ends of his endless scarf. That was the first time. Definitively.[2]

But even then, he still recognised her. She looked just like Beryl Reid. She was rude and abrupt and insinuating. She knew far more about him than she was letting on.

And before that; he had memories of her coming to Earth to visit him, back when he was exiled and disgruntled lord of his own manor. She'd been involved in a ghastly plot to make him think he was losing his mind and faking the various alien invasions that were going on all over the joint in the nineteen seventies.[3]

Before that, too, when he was Patrick Troughton; with the Dalek Supreme in the diamond mines of Marlion. And her butch dyke traffic warden assistant Jenny had had a stomach complaint because she wasn't used to time travel.[4]

She had pleaded for his life, that time. She did it out of love for him. She was devoted to him. She always had been, it turned out, and always would be.

But Iris always left the Doctor completely baffled.

"I suppose what you have to remember about Paul is that he's so relentlessly nostalgic. And all the things he's nostalgic about, he has to go back—into the past, as it were—and collect them up again. He has a terrible fear that, as he goes on, everything behind him is vanishing. Maybe that's why he writes books; to prove, at least to himself, that he was actually *there"*

The blonde in the catsuit was painting her toenails. Her feet were up on the coffee table and a yellow cocktail cigarette smouldering in the ashtray.

"It's like," she chuckled, "when all his Terrance Dicks novelisations vanished

overnight. Then he found all one-hundred and fifty of them on a market stall in Newton Aycliffe, being rained on and being resold at an exorbitant price. Well, he wasn't going to buy them back. He knew them just about off by heart anyway. So what was he going to do?"

She paused to blow on her feet as the bus they were travelling in gave a small lurch. Her companion, a distinguished looking fella in a green velvet jacket looked uncomfortable.

"He'd have to write them all again. With remembered patches and shreds and doing it like he wanted it to be."

The man coughed awkwardly. "Nostalgia's a dangerous business. Isn't it better to push on ahead, leaving old lives behind, having new adventures?"

Iris gave him a hard stare. "Who says?" She wrinkled her nose and shrugged. "There's an awful lot to be said for rewriting and revisiting the past. Anyway, last time I saw him he was all excited about having found a copy of the Geoff Love orchestra doing the theme tune in 1978 ... a kind of disco version in brass and woodwind. It had been one of his favourite records when he was eight. Still brought tears to his eyes."

"Just like I get over Brahms and Mahler."

Iris looked at him wryly. "There you go. You're so relentlessly high-culture, Doctor. A bit of a snob, really. You have to admit to enjoying trash sometimes, you know. For its own sake. Lighten up."

He grimaced. "Trash?" he said.

"Low cultural artefacts." Iris reached over and patted his knee.

"In a word, lovey: Us."

I was asked to write something about the books I've written.

I suppose I believe any writer writes the books they really want to read. They write the books they think they remember reading when they were children. Now those books are gone and lost in a house move or an accident. Or they reconstitute themselves magically, distorted, like a dream.

When I was asked to write this, it was because (I was told) those books of mine evince devotion and bafflement, in equal measures, in their readers.

Good.

That's exactly what I always got out of *Doctor Who* and, indeed, out of all of the books I ever loved.

The bus was steaming merrily along through the time-space vortex. Once her golden nails were dry, Iris popped back to the cab to take the wheel again. She

was thinking about how she'd actually been at the recording of that Geoff Love orchestral version of the theme. Back when she'd worked for the Ministry, and someone High Up had suspicions that the lauded conductor was secreting subliminal messages into his elaborate reworkings of TV scifi themes. He'd been quite right, of course.[5]

Disguised as a distinguished cellist and Space 1999 freak, Iris had been the one giving Love advice on his arrangements; that he should bolster the formidable brass section so as to make it sound like the menacing, ravening hordes of the Doctor's enemies encroaching on him and his friends through their endless travels. Geoff Love had been delighted with her suggestions.

She hunted for the tape in her glove compartment.

The Doctor was by her side. "If I were more rational... what would I suppose then, hm?"

"Don't know, ducky."

"I'll tell you what. That you were an imposter of some kind. Someone dreamed up and injected retrospectively into my already-troubled time stream to further complicate my lives."

"Oh," she laughed, "Who by? A faction of paradox-inducing psychopaths from the far future perhaps?"[6]

"Or maybe," he went on, his mouth tight, "you're from some other dimension where I'm someone else entirely and all the times you claim to have met me, you really did ... and we did know each other throughout history..."[7]

She had found the wrong Geoff Love tape. It was Shirley Bassey singing. No Doctor Who theme. It would have to do.

As 'What Now, My Love?' crackled from her antiquated speaker system, the Doctor had started to rant. "You just take advantage of me because my memory's been so badly shaken in recent years ... I don't know exactly where I've been ... how many lives I've really had, whether I'm a renegade[8], a president[9], exiled to Earth[10] or exiled to my home world[11], whether I had a mother[12] or whether I was processed out of some diabolical gene-splicing machine[13] or whether it's all been some peculiar distraction or fantasy."[14]

"Never mind," she laughed. "What if I'm from a place where you don't exist at all, hm? Have you thought about that?"[15]

He looked down glumly at the yellowed paperback she had given him. *Doctor Who in an exciting adventure with the Daleks.*[16]

"This contradicts the Terrance Dicks book very badly,"[17] he tutted. "No wonder I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

“You could always ask the Daleks which is the right version!” she laughed. Then she softened. “Look, learn to live with the contradictions. Learn to have a laugh.”

His face went dark. “I need to know which was the right way!

It’s very important to me!”

She didn’t have the heart to tell him that the way she remembered it, it had been *her* on the planet Skaro back when it was a denuded, ashen wilderness and the petrified forests had been overrun by recalcitrant Aryans in savage blue eyeshadow. As far as she was concerned, *she* was the one who led the attack on the electrified city of the Daleks. And in her version, things had been much more terrifying, naturally. The Daleks had been experimenting with hallucinogens and weird sex; it was a real tale from the Sixties. Something out of Philip K Dick.[18]

“You know,” she said, "I could be the one saying to you, that you’re supplanting *my* life and memories. You’re turning all of my own, glamorous, sexy sorties in time and space into a kind of... series of adventure stories for kids!”

He stiffened. "I’m doing nothing of the kind. And we have to sort this out. One of us had these adventures and only one.”

"Doctor,” she said patiently. "We’re talking about a series of stories that involve paradoxes, time travel, mind control, virtual selves, cloning, regression, reincarnation, talking vegetables, cybernetics, regeneration, prolepsis, analepsis, alternative dimensional instabilities, metatextuality, allegory, satire, fantasy, revisionism, cliches, plagiarism and hoodwinkery!”[19]

"So?”

"So that’s my life as much as it’s yours! It’s all of our lives! Can’t we just enjoy it for what it is? Why do you need a time line for heaven’s sake? Why do you need a precise autobiography?”

"It would just be nice, that’s all,” he said huffily.

Even I get mixed up with the various incarnations of Iris Wildthyme. She’s not meant to have a stable time line. Who’d want one of those anyway? Just imagine living your life in exact chronological order! Ghastly.

None of us do. Not really.

There is a very old, imperious Iris. Rather like Edith Sitwell as she’s described in the novelist Denton Welch’s memoirs. A sagacious arachnid; a grande dame glittering in a carapace of ebon pearls. It was she who called all seven Irises to the Death Zone on Gallifrey.[20]

There’s the Iris who looks a lot like Shirley Bassey in her prime. Who posed as the revered chanteuse for a while and made a mint on the colonialist nostalgia circuit.[21]

The Iris we know best: the one with frizzy, lilac hair and a silver cardigan and sensible boots. The one who, feeling her age and destined to die on Hyspero, most doggedly pursues her amour, the Doctor.[22]

And then: bolstering her hot pink blaster in her thigh high boots and swishing back her immaculate locks of auburn hair, the most recent Iris. The one who looks like Jane Fonda in the late Sixties and who finds herself gravitating to that heady era; working occasionally for the Ministry of Incursions And Ontological Wonders (MIAOW).[23]

She knows—Oh, of course she knows—that she’s a very deliberate parody of Doctor Who.

That’s why she loves him so.

They didn’t speak for a while. He sloped off to the back of the bus and put the kettle on, thinking furiously. What disturbed him most was that the things Iris was saying were being borne out in the way his memory was working suddenly. It was as if his life was looping and tangling back on itself like a horrid vine thing.

After that terrible business at the dawn of time, when he’d been in his fifth incarnation, when the Master had for some reason taken to impersonating Fu Manchu and plucking Concordes out of the sky like butterflies in a net and hauling them back through time ... What /^happened next?[24] Well, they’d left Tegan behind at Heathrow, hadn’t they? And he and Nyssa had gone on travelling together ... and it hadn’t been long till they’d bumped into Tegan again in Amsterdam over that dreadful affair with Omega trying to take over his body and ...[25]

But now, suddenly, he had extra memories of that Teganless time when only he and Nyssa had been alone in the TARDIS. Suddenly whole new adventures were popping into his head. Something about Antarctica and vicious dinosaurs made all of bone marauding about the place[26]... and then being in Venice as it seemed about to tumble and crumble into the Adriatic ...[27]

"I’ve got extra memories!” he explained, and the teapot crashed to the floor. "Someone’s been slipping in extra adventures for me!”

Iris shouted back down to him. "You should be glad! It’s a gift! It’s extra life!

Someone somewhere is making you live further, interesting times!”

She grunted then, bringing the bus in to land. He came haring down the gangway to her.

"I’m starting to remember all sorts of peculiar things,” he gasped. "I feel like the Brigadier after his nervous breakdown. Everything comes flooding back...”[28]

"In a flashback sequence,” nodded Iris sagely. "That’s what we call it in Trash Culture. Something that relies on the expert and specific knowledge of a loyal audience of fans, but something that doesn’t render the experience too abstruse to the casual viewer or reader.”

He gulped as the interstitial mists began to clear, somewhere beyond the smudgy windscreen. "I feel like a casual viewer of my own life. As if I’ve missed out vital episodes and the story arc doesn’t quite make sense to me...” He put a hand to an elegantly fuddled brow.

"And I’m a Fan, Doctor. Do you know what that means?” She was shouting above the rasping, droning[29] noise as the bus began to rematerialise. "That means I know Everything. I can quote chunks of Everything to you. But not in the correct order ... because there’s no such thing.”

“If these extra memories keep getting slotted into my life,” he said, with dawning horror, “Then my life just gets longer and longer. I’m completely ... elasticised!”

She patted his hand.

“It means I live forever!” he said, aghast.

“Barring accidents,” she said, just before they were both flung to the floor.[30]

If you particularly enjoy reading and making lists, why not read the following?

. Doctor Who and The Scarlet Empress
2. Iris Wildthyme’s Old Flames
3. Doctor Who and Verdigris
4. Iris Wildthyme and the Fabulously Priceless Baubles of the Dalek Supreme
5. Iris Wildthyme and the Maestro of Doom
6. Doctor Who and Interference
7. Doctor Who and the Blue Angel
8. Doctor Who and the War Games
9. Doctor Who and the Invasion of Time
0. Doctor Who and the Auton Invasion
. Doctor Who and the Infinity Doctors

2. Doctor Who: The Novelisation of the Hit TV Movie
3. Doctor Who and Lungbarrow
4. Iris Wildthyme and the Mauve Autodidact
5. Iris Wildthyme's Gilded Utensils
6. Doctor Who and the Dead Planet
7. Doctor Who and an Unearthly Child
8. Iris Wild thyme and the Extremely Lively Planet
9. The Sacred Ajai'ib of Hyspero
0. Iris Wildthyme's Seven of Thirteen
. Iris Wildthyme's Goldfinger
2. Death to Iris Wildthyme
3. Iris Wildthyme's Fabric of Time Itself (MIAOW)
4. Doctor Who's Time Flight
5. Doctor Who and the Arc of Infinity
6. Doctor Who and the Land of the Dead
7. Doctor Who and the Stones of Venice
8. Doctor Who and Mawdryn Undead
9. Iris Wildthyme's Wheezing, Groaning Enigma
0. And Ready To Embark On An Exciting New Adventure.

In the Sixties

Paul Magrs

Were there really Quarks and Krotons queuing peacefully on the platform at King's Cross? Bustling gently and eager; lumpen crystalline beings awaiting enlightenment. That was just a dream, just a dream. All those pilgrimages they went on, all those mystics. A dream we were all in. Under somebody's laconic spell. We went on a steam train up to Wales, to spend a wet weekend in an old Butlins camp, which had been commandeered for the purposes of the spiritual revolution. We went to liberate ourselves and dressed in all our feathered finery because we knew the press would be there to see us off. A gorgeous jamboree on the platform, and the train's engines and carriages bedecked with flowers and charms.

The chalets of the holiday camp reeked of incense and drugs. Music blared through the tannoy system. We arrived in hopeful droves, moving in a kind of bleeding elastic tango of compulsive need, bells and cymbals clashing, bongos bonging. And the corrupt old mystic sat on his tasseled cushion under the fiery glitter ball in the dance hall. He had us kneeling at his feet and chanting. Did we see through his shenanigans? His hokum and blarney? Of course he was the Master under his saffron robes and beads and flowers, with is ray gun close to his twin black hearts. Once we were firmly under his heady influence, swaying and orchestrated, this otherworldly demon was exhorting us: "You must return to London. There you must destroy Dr Who!" But we were too far gone other than to shrug and puzzle over the meaning of our spiritual leader's maniacal laughter.

Some of us got a bit of the true picture when, one night on our Welsh pilgrimage, he had us perform a full black mass and there was this awful stink of goat's cheese and boiled eggs in the dark. I remember Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith telling em late one night in their chalet, that what he really wanted was for the Daleks to invade Britain. He'd have really loved it. He got off on their little blue bumps and their robot arms. Just before the Seventies began, he wanted to bring them on down in their ships the size of department stores. Land them displaying their glittering windows in Sloane Square, right beside Peter Jones and extend their escalators, letting their vile automata file onto the rainy street.

Let's see them horde and lord it down the King's Road, shooting fashion victims, photographers, the rich.

Anyway, besieged on all sides, Sylvia said. Peculiar lizard men were meanwhile massing in caverns deep underground - did I mention them? And in the toppled, forgotten sunken cities of the sea - indignant fish people. It was a crazy time, full of schemes. Dr Who's response (and this infuriated the Master) was to become a quiz show host. A light celebrity. Get his face on the cover of the Radio Times. He'd given up the crazy stuff, though he threw magnificent parties for freaks and hangers on at his house in Maida Vale. His old Police Box was the centre -piece, though only the selected few were allowed to venture in for a peek during those weeklong festivals of hallucinogens and duty free.

Tall, skinny fella with a gaunt, alert face. Looked like he might have been a B movie idol in the forties, early fifties. Now in his sixties with a twitchy silver tash and combed back hair and bright blue eyes. He chime din with the raffish Bohemianism of the time by affecting Edwardian -cut clothes in extravagant shades of velvet and silk. The young girls loved him, flocking to his sides. He did them card tricks, passed out Quaaludes and enticed them into his shambolic time machine. It was like Beyond the Valley of the Dolls with the added piquant threat of alien attack and enslavement. Dr Who had retired, though, and all he did was throw parties. The sixties had, unequivocally, been his decade, and that decade was shutting up shop. He wanted to go out in a delicious burst of decadence and glamour, waving a big fuck-you-very-much to those, up above, who had mysteriously decided that his travelling days were done. When he was very stoned and bitter-sounding on some nights, he would rail against the myriad injustices of the universe. His gathered guests would wonder and nod. All the great and the good, and some of the wicked. I saw Dusty Springfield once, with Mida Slike, the international spy, Brigadier Lethbridge Stewart whispering sweet nothings into the ear of Shirley Bassey and then Tom Jones, while a stern robot dog sniffed his crotch and Reggie Kray kept an eye on the door. Cilla Black and Lulu sang a combative "Step Inside Love" on a gin- sodden stage, to a small crowd that included Angus Wilson, Judy Garland, Iris Murdoch, Marianne Faithfull, Brian Jones, Dirk Bogarde, John and Yoko, Michael Moorcock, Angela Carter, Joe Orton, Jackie O, Beryl Reid, a Cyberman and Jamie McCrimmon. I saw Joe Orton take brawny misplaced Highlander Jamie to one side, into the gleaming kitchen, press him up against the spit-level grill and explain how he, the greatest playwright of the age, was prepared to let the kilted,

time-travelling tyke take his cock in his mouth and suck him off. It was all in Orton's diaries, found by his agent, the day after he was murdered, how he'd always longed to take McCrimmon down the throat. "One day, Jamie, it'll all be filth like this. It'll all be fan fiction. Slash fiction. Do-what-you-want fiction. That's what we're starting here." And of course Jamie would do it - but only if the Cybermen could watch. It was a Cybermen mark two model, fresh from dusty Telos. The kind in extra bright and tight tinfoil and an arrogant slot for a mouth.

Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch were, yet again, discussing the problem of portraying authentic evil in the modern novel. They were on bean bags and getting through the champagne at a terrifying rate. He was all togged out like a Victorian gent, only every stitch of his apparel was a florid pink (as was his beaming face) and Iris Murdoch had her floppy-collared blouse untucked, her tweedy skirt awry. From her hair, you'd think she'd just woken up. Dr Who breezed past and told them, if they really wanted to know about the problem of evil, they ought to get themselves to the nightmare world of Skaro, where everyone was a vicious bastard. If they'd seen the final assault on the dread Dalek city, then the two of them - dilettante bourgeois humanists that they were - would understand it all. Angus smiled gently, beguilingly, and told him that the Dalek city was simply an effusion; a symptom of the same quandary. How else was it generated in the mass unconsciousness; how else had it caught light in the public imagination, burning with such fervour in the hearts and minds of a nation's mechanic school children (sending them spinning round playgrounds, arms and fists extended, chanting evil lines?) - if it wasn't all a result, a dreaded psychic, delayed fallout from the not-too-distant Second World War? Weren't Dr Who's dreams of easy travel elsewhere just a vision of how the world might have been? Dr Who sniffed his warm cherry brandy and curded novelists of all persuasions.

"He still believes that he could take us there," Iris Murdoch said benignly. She fixed him with a baleful stare. "That's his inner landscape he's sailing into - peopled by Mechanoids, Thais and Voords. He's an authentic English fantasist, plain as any Tolkein or Lewis. It's all whimsy with him and we ought to respect that, Angus." Dr Who looked slightly mollified, but felt subtly miffed. He had a certain respect for this Iris (unlike the other Iris, currently rolling around on the floor of the cloakroom with Robin, Batman's fantastically-endowed boy companion.) Though he thought Murdoch's imagination tainted by a certain continental inflection. "If it's true," she said carefully, "the fourth and fifth

dimension, all of that, perhaps you'd care to round off the night by taking us there?" Angus shook his head and chuckled. "It was just a dream, Dr Who. It's just a dream." Then his eyes lit up, because Steed and Emma Peel had, at last, shown up, with more champagne. They were always good for a laugh. "I get all my information from the Ministry and the divinely lissom Mrs Peel," Wilson purred. "That's how I move from the comedy of errors, the country house - to the global novel of paranoia, multi-culturalism and desire on a phenomenal scale. Iris Murdoch was explaining to Dr Who that Angus Wilson had been the same since the mid-sixties, when he had started teaching English Literature at the University of East Anglia. "Talk about the Dalek city!" she cried. Mrs Peel flung herself down on a plastic inflatable and cast a smoldering look at Mrs Gale who was dancing in a quite vulgar fashion in the knocked -through lounge with a delirious Jerry Cornelius.

'Put me in a novel, Angus,' Emma sighed. 'Rescue me from kitsch.' Angus was dismayed. 'I'm afraid it's all downhill from here, my dear. Everything we do now, at this fag-end of time, it'll all end kitsch quite soon.' Iris Murdoch struggled to her feet, taking hold of Susan Songtag's proffered arm. And, on the stage, David Bowie was doing a storming rendition of The Laughing Gnome. Then he went into some rambling account of how his songs were transmitted into his brain by a transsexual alien being who lived in a gorgeous pyramid on Mars.

Anais Nin, diarist and globe-trotting nymphomaniac arrived, evidently believing it was a Come-As-Your-Own-

Madness party (another one). She had dressed, to that end, in a vast, gilded birdcage, with eyes painted on her breasts, ›it'll do, dear,' said Dr Who., as he made his way through the press of the crowd, Marianne on his arm, murmuring softly. Not quite the end of the decade. It was November the twelfth, 1969. John and Yoko, hairy and stoned, were still in their white wedding suits. They were wanting another bed -in, to protest something or other, but there wasn't enough futons and duvets to go round and, anyway, Dr Who didn't quite approve of that kind of thing. Not bed -ins per se, but directionless protest was a drag.

It was my birthday. I mean, the very day I was born. Not in Maida Vale, not at this gaudy carnival, in the midst of all the tinseling and streamers. I was born in Jarrow, Tyne and Wear. I didn't know it then (how could I?) but I really wanted to tell them not to get too excited, not to get too whipped up in their premature

pre-millennial fever and fervour. I wanted them not to self-destruct or to wake, queasily despondent, with massive, decades-long hangovers. I wanted the party to go on till I got time to catch up and join it. It poured down. A very black night. The rain coming down silver and black. Early global warming and the streets heaved and pulsed with rain, trees crackling and tumbling, shops underwater, cars and Daleks floating helplessly away. Catastrophes of JG Ballardian dimensions. I fell to grateful sleep that first, that very first night of my incredibly long life and I was content and sure that the party would go on.

It was very early morning and Maida Vale was flooding out. Waves of party guests were leaving, trashed, distressed. Noel Coward swarmed in late with Dietrich piggying on his back, both decked in peacock sequins. They watched, delighted, as the dregs of Dr Who's end of the sixties do followed him into his police box. That night, an impossible number of the clamorous throng, vanished inside. You could hear them shrieking with pleasure within. What a magician! Noel took hold of Dietrich's tiny hand. 'Shall we?' She shrugged and took a sip from her black cigarette. 'Who will miss us if we go? We might as leave with them all.' the two of them brought up the rear, nodding a curt hello to Jamie the Highlander, who looked sated and licked, bleary-eyed and sheepish. The wooden doors shut behind them all. After a few seconds, the light on the the top of the box started to flash white, spasmodically. Then, with what sounded very much like the closing chords of the Beatles' A Day in the Life (or was it the start of Help?), it disappeared.

Silence dropped on the ruinous interior of the house in Maida Vale. Champagne soaked into the white woolen carpets. A half-finished drawing of Orton by Proctor caught light from the tip of Susan Foreman's abandoned fag. And in the North East of England, in a hospital cot, I rolled my eyes in my sleep for the very first time. Having the first of many amused responses to a dream.

Entertaining Mr O

Paul Magrs

When I looked up I could see the back of his head and his forgettable face from every conceivable angle. Know your enemy.

I hate spying and all that subterfuge nonsense. I crossed my legs and addressed him thus: "What's all this nonsense about, then?"

He glowered at me inasmuch as he could. "I take it Alistair sent you?"

"Oh yes. He gets me to do his dirty work for him these days."

"Not his unpaid scientific advisor?"

"I gather he was pensioned off rather suddenly. All his papers taken off him. Now he's a non-person living in Wales. It's quite hush hush."

Hidden within, a separate space. Filled with stolen chairs and filing cabinets and odds and sods of Ministry equipment.

"It really was a sham," Tom said. "Anti matter doesn't exist."

"It certainly looks that way." I poked around in my carpet bag for a crow bar. "Help me with this crate."

Much groaning and rending of fresh wood. The first three crates we opened were empty apart from saw dust.

"This is hopeless, Iris," he said. "What are we looking for?"

"The way out," I said.

The fourth crate was much more successful.

When its lid came away we could only see solid matte black within. A black that trembled and shivered at our touch.

Then it rose up, an obeslisk of black. It tumbled and twirled and, before we could budge an inch, it dropped the two of us, swift as night fall in the tropics.

We were falling and falling and then we had arrived.

And so had everyone else.

"And you're his replacement?"

"Iris," I said, and didn't offer my hand. Down to business now, I thought. "What's all this wild talk about anti-matter?"

He shrugged. "It's all quite true. I'm holding you to ransom."

"Are you really?"

"I don't come from round here. This isn't even me. I'm projecting this self from a universe of anti-matter and..."

"Oh, come on now..."

He looked almost hurt at that. "I am trapped there. They left me there." And he started to tell me his tale.

Quick body check. At this time in my immensely long and rather glamorously breakneck career I was elderly Iris; burly and haggard, stuffed into my sheepskin coat. I was travelling on my bus with Tom, a human boy whom I had only recently allowed to join my select crew. I had picked him up one night in Soho, where he had dashed aboard the bus, thinking it (not unnaturally) bound for Putney Common. But no ordinary 22 mine, oh no! Tom in his orange bomber jacket and crop top and combat pants - bless him - suddenly finding himself whisked into the

Elizabethan Court and a set of malign intrigues which were, I must confess, largely down to me...and now my unshakeable travelling companion during the time in my life when I was - albeit slightly unwillingly, and rather surlily - employed by the ministry.

This particular jaunt had begun right outside the Tate. We were parked in 1973, up some back alley off Vauxhall Road.

I think he must have jumped. By the time I was at the water's edge there was nothing, of course, no ripples, to mark his passing. What a strange man.

He's left his coat on a vandalised bench. It was greasy and damp to the touch. I rifled the pcokets, but the sample of supposed anti-matter had gone with him into the Thames. I found a card in the top right hand pocket.

Personal Storage. S. Foreman.

It turned out to be a warehouse in South London.

"Tom, he doesn't need a ticket..."

Tom wasn't pleased. He'd been rather enjoying his role as conductor and wasn't pleased to let the dapper Alistair on without paying. He looked the newcomer up and down. Alistair was undercover. Camel hair coat. Nifty briefcase. I gathered him up in a bear hug and he coughed politely to be released.

He was nodding at a woman fiddling with a connection and soldering busily at a profusion of wires. Without looking at us, she said, "I'm trying to keep the purple nasty at bay. Not too well, I'm afraid."

She was in a silver catsuit bikini affair and leather boots. She had masses of golden blond hair and green eyeshadow. When she finally turned I gasped. I thought she looked rather marvellous and I could tell that Tom and Alistair thought so, too.

"Oh no," she said, frowning. "You're who I think you are, aren't you?"

I should have been mystified. But I wasn't.

At which point the jelly like being shot out one its vile excrescences and lightly brushed her shoulder. And with, as Alistair described it, a bang and a flash and a crash, she disappeared, along with the creature itself, a swivel chair and various bits of electronic doo-dahs.

Next thing, he comes to sit by me before I've even got a drink in my hand, settling comfily onto the faded chintz by the sofa. He thrust a sheaf of X rays in my face. Crackling silver photographs I couldn't make head nor tail of. "What are these?" asked Alistair, his little caterpillar tash twitching in its usual irritable interrogative way.

It was downstairs in the hideously overpriced cafe at the Tate where we met. Alistair had arranged the whole thing as usual and I was to expect Mr O to be wearing a single red carnation in his buttonhole. I found him in that circular room lined with mirrors; the blandest looking fella I'd ever seen. Head like an egg, no features to speak of, nondescript suit. Toying with a cafetiere. I had an orange juice. Two pounds. I'd charge that back to the Ministry. Alistair's always going on about my bar bills.

I sidled up to Mr O who, though we were the only art-lovers present that afternoon, pretended he hadn't noticed me. Funny, that room of mirrors.

"They look like pictures of space," I said, "but in negative." Between us, Alistair and I kept up the pretence that I had never been to outer space. Almost as if I had a prison record he was politely disregarding.

I looked at these snaps and, all of a sudden, plain as day, I could suddenly see some poor old chap's face with his mouth hanging open. As if he was being zapped through space.

"My tame experts reckon," said Alistair, licking his lips, "that this game keeper has been transported off to an alternative dimension somewhere."

"Oh dear," I said. I heard Tom tut. I asked, "Did they by chance mention a universe of anti matter?"

"Something like that," said Alistair, sounding surprised.

"Hm," I gave an authorative grunt.

"Will you step in and help us, Iris?" he asked earnestly.

I could never say no to him. I don't know why.

"Tom," I alerted my sceptical companion wryly, "we're needed."

"What do you make of them, Iris?" he said. "Taken by some kind of experimental weather balloon. Wretched thing, brought down on an estuary, a bird sanctuary near the coast..."

"Come and sit down Tom," I said, "this is going to be scary."

He tutted and yanked open a cupboard door. He's so nosy.

A body toppled out on top of him. He shrieked once and disappeared beneath a glistening, purple mass of anti-flesh.

"It's quite dead," I said, manhandling the beastie off him.

He looked completely revolted.

I prodded the body, which was no longer crackling. "I've got a suspicion..." I said, and yanked the head off the thing. It was a rubber head. The we both stared down at the pallid, suffocated face of Mr O.

"What..." began Tom.

There was a loud burst of static from the television. We lost our picture.

"I don't believe in anti-matter," I told Mr O patiently. I fished out my cigarettes and wondered if I was allowed to light up here. Let them stop me.

"That's your choice," he said.

"I think it's something they've just made up."

That was when he pulled a viscous purple substance fomr his coat pocket. It appeared to be wrapped in cling film. I gave it the once over.

"Do you believe me now?"

The disgusting package crackled at me.

Of course we took a leisurely turn around the Tate, where they were showing the dappled and generously gaudy canvases of Pierre Bonnard, and Alistair talked a little more about his secret headquarters being under attack from these globular gel like creatures who crept up from the drains and made things disappear with a single touch of an extended glistening tentacle.

"Sounds horrid," I said, peering at Bonnard's poor wife, submerged and at peace in her bath. He painted her again and again in the bath.

Tom tossed his head/ "Alien incursions, you mean?"

"Amongst other things."

At this stage Tom was being rather purist. Not quite believing in my forays into the future. He thought the whole concept embarrassingly quaint. He had no

truck with outer space. He'd learn, poor lamb.

"Who trapped you?" I asked Mr O. "You keep saying 'They'."

"You know," he said wheedlingly. "They sent me into a black hole to harness the forces beyond it. When they were developing time travel."

"Sorry," I shrugged. "You'll have to tell me more."

Mr O started to collect his things together. The small bundle of livid matter went back into his pocket. "I think I'm wasting our time." Suddenly he looked shabby and defeated.

"The sisterhood of Karn are threre. The revenants of Morbius. It's terrible thing. We're all summoned, Iris."

"Well, I'm not going."

The ancient woman barked with laughter. "You have no choice, dear..."

Then she was gone.

"The days are just packed, aren't they?" asked Tom, as the phone rang. "It's Alistair," he hissed at me, hand over the receiver. "He says we have to get down to Demon's Rest right now. It's that dig on the telly, they've..." "I'm not going there," I told him.

I wanted to go to this warehouse instead.

South London. After midnight. Dusty cracked panes. Broken glass cemented into the walls. We ram raided the gates. We set the alarms and klaxons blaring. We jemmied the locks.

Inside, boxes on boxes on boxes.

"Who's this one?" asked Alistair, returning Tom's suspicious glare. I made the introductions and told Tom to pour us some drinks.

Alistair was never very approving of my delectable male assistants, Considered them a security risk. Probably sensible.

At the Ministry, a day later, we saw the empty spaces where the missing furniture had been. As invasions and incursions go, it wasn't that spectacular. A bare patch of lino here and there; missing doors, too.

In came Benton, in a Bond Street suit and he said breathlessly, that they had one of amorphous culprits held captive in their basement. Did we want to take a look?

"Iris?" inquired Alistair politely. He was opening a packet of digestives.

"Why not," I smiled, and noted that this Benton chap was giving me a funny look. As we went down in the narrow lift, Tom was sulking. "She's Iris?" Benton asked Alistair, who nodded quickly, as if he didn't want to discuss it right now.

I followed him out to the steps at the front of the gallery. There was a school party there, and tourists, and art students rolling their own fags as they sluched about on the stone. In the crush and push I almost lost him. He was heading out the main gates and I kept a discreet distance. He was heading for the water. The brown stretch of the Thames, languid in the muggy heat.

He shot over the road with a surprising burst of speed.

I couldn;t cross for a while. The road was full of red double deckers snorting and stamping between us.

"Well," said Alistair, "you see, it's rather urgent. The headquarters are disappearing pice by piece; filing cabinets, desks, valuable files, equipment, all vanishing with a flash and a crash into this universe of purported anti-matter."

Beside me, Tom was looking annoyed. I could tell he didn't believe a word of it. I was having doubts myself. We sat on the ox blood leather of the seats and stared at portraits of Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots and mulled it over. Tom didn't know much about my various dealings with the Ministry and he'd hadn't taken well to Alistair's bluff manner.

"Iris has got us out of a number of awful scrapes," Alistair gallantly explained.

In the cellar, we found the globular monstrosity; a cowering, coruscating behemoth hulking in the dimly lit recess and held back by an amazing array of machines and devices and wires, safety pins, crocodile clips. Somebody's amazing lash-up. A kind of force field, I would have guessed.

Benton was saying, "You were looking for her. I assume she got here before you."

Benton seemed at last to accept that I was, in fact, Iris, though I'd appeared to have been superceded in that role, for an hour or two at least, by a much more slinky version. He disguised his disappointment and saw to arrangements for putting Tom and I up in their oh-so secret headquarters. Brought us corned beef and pickle sandwiches on a tray. Hot chocolate. Tom and I were both gagging for a real drink.

We watched telly. Alistair had gone off somewhere to check out some other happening that had broken out.

We watched a live broadcast from a village where an archaeologist was going to break into a sacred tomb on the dot of midnight. It was pretty thrilling stuff.

Tom wandered about, fiddled with the phone extension, the plastic daffodils in a jar. He sighed.

The screen went black, lime green, black again. There was a swirl of mist, then

a voice. "There you are..." it came imperiously.

I felt the blood drain out of my face.

A very old, haughty looking woman swam into view. It was like coming before your headmistress once more. She had on the most fantastic jewels. "Where's the other one?" "I reckon she's been zapped off to this universe of anti-matter." I said carelessly.

"Rubbish," snapped the women on the screen. "She's been kidnapped. Several of us have. We're in the Death Zone. Remember that?" "There's no such thing."

Being an extract from "The Amazing Adventures of Iris Wildthyme on Neptune"

Paul Magrs

Another chapter begins with me opening my eyes. Funny that, isn't it?

But I often think that the spaces between chapters are like falling asleep. When I read I generally read in bed, and I try to read to the end of a chapter before giving in to sleep. So, for me, the odd interstitial moments that wedge chapters apart are heavy, dreamy spaces. Every chapter in the world should begin with the opening of eyes.

And here I am doing just that, and drinking in an altogether new experience.

I knew at once that I was standing on Neptune. And I didn't question it for a moment, nor thought for a second that I'd gone bananas. It's difficult to explain. My whereabouts was utterly obvious to me. As if I had lived on the blue planet all my life and each particle of my being had been woven from this world's very substance. I knew I was on Neptune like you, beautiful reader, know that you are on the Earth.

I was lying down again, but this time I could move. Although I had a touch of pins and needles. I was in the thick of a spongy bright blue growth of moss, at the bottom of a natural bowl in the ground. I could see low hills over the ridge of the bowl; they were a deep powder blue and the sky was a much more vivid purple than the dawn on Yorkshire I had left behind.

The sun was intense and blasting my whole, spread naked body with light which, here, seemed rather hotter and more glaring than I was used to. It was rather like seeing a fairly unassuming friend unexpectedly in mutual company, and watching them behave much more effusively than you know them to be.

I sat up to examine some quite interesting rock formations around me. The deep blue rock appeared to be studded with a variety of precious jewels. They were fabulous, but quite impossible to prise out from their sockets. I gave it a good go, however, before giving up.

I was gagging for a drink, I realised. If I'd known I was coming out this far. I'd have stocked up properly with some sensible supplies. I never go anywhere without my carpetbag full of the adventuress's essentials; always including my battered hip flask of gin. But supposedly, since my clothes had been so mysteriously whipped off my person during these proceedings, the rather peculiar form of travel I had endured meant that my invitation to this world stipulated I bring nothing, quite literally, but myself.

I hopped out of my bed of blue moss and decided I really must go on the lookout for something to wet my whistle.

Well, I wasn't expecting what came next. I should have, really. I'm meant be up on things like what life is like on other planets. But on this occasion I forgot myself and jumped up far too enthusiastically.

I shot through the air about thirteen feet and came down with a bump, sending up clouds of bright blue dust. Bloody gravity.

I'll spare you the details of my having to spend round about an hour learning how to walk again. But by the end of it I had discovered the tiny amount of effort I would have to make to get myself about the place here on Neptune. It was like walking in a dream. I got the feeling that if I suddenly burst into a sprint I would shoot screaming off the surface of the planet.

In the end I compromised in a kind of lurching hop-hop-jump across the surprisingly arid surface of my new world. Gods knew what I looked like; starkers and bouncing about the place. At least Harriet wasn't there to see me. I could imagine the look on her face.

On Earth I'm not the gainliest of creatures.

Harriet once remarked tt I look like a brown paper parcel tied up badly with string. But this is an old woman's body I'm inside, so what do you expect? It's like the photographer. Eve Arnold, once told Joan Crawford, when the ageing actress expressed an interest in posing for nudie pictures: Something happens to flesh after fifty.

So, at home on Earth I'm quite used, and accepting of, inhabiting a body that sags and droops and bulges. I see my ungainliness as a kind of physical record of the life I have lived. Each wrinkle and each spare tyre tell a number of stories of their own.

But here on Neptune, it was suddenly like being young. I didn't need as much energy to get about the place. In a single bound I could cover a huge expanse of ground.

Gravity, it turned out, had decided to be exceedingly kind to me.

I couldn't wait to come upon a full-length mirror. It would be, I decided, like having an all-over body-lift.

It was while I was hopping about, all full of myself because of my unexpected rejuvenation, that I came across the building.

Now this was very exciting. I knew nothing about life on Neptune.

The building had four walls and was built from the bright blue slate of this region.

I bounded up to it with far more bravado than I actually felt. It turned out to be just four feet high. Were they midgets on this world? Would I be like Gulliver in Lilliput, or his long-neglected wife coming after him, and falling prey to the same inquisitive gnomes? There didn't seem to be any doors or windows on the side nearest me, but I crept up, keeping my footsteps as small as could be. I took hold of the blue wall and peered at the roof.

Some kind of quite transparent, quartz-like material canopied this small structure and I could see right through it. I blinked.

I was staring at a few hundred perfectly round, indigo eggs. Each was a foot in diameter and they were squashed in together in such a way that you feared for whatever was due to break out of them.

And while I stared I realised that six of the bloody things had already started to hatch. The eggs skins came apart oh-so delicately; cracking like the flimsiest ice while tiny hands and feet inside worked away at demolishing the walls of their cells.

I was reminded of the Gunther Grass poem. The one about "we are all inside the egg," when he goes on to wonder who's going to crack him open and gollop him into a hot frying pan. Well, that wasn't a very comforting thought for me to be having, at all.

I watched them hatch and I was appalled — I must admit, even cosmopolitan old me — at the hideous things that came out, all damp and oily and dazed-looking.

They were, in turn, startled and blinking in the sunshine as it came refracting through their crystal ceiling. The sight of me looming massively over them must have been pretty diverting, too.

They seemed mostly body, with tiny scrawny heads, attenuated, slippery necks and seven legs, or, as I was told some time later, three legs and two arms with an intermediary pair of limbs which could come in useful as either arms or legs. Their eyes were all over the place. Goggling fish eyes wedged at irregular intervals into their tiny, bald skulls.

I remember thinking at the time: what queer and hideous beasties these natives

of Neptune, these… Nepotists, are! Little knowing yet just how wrapped up in their affairs I was about to become.

They were a kind of green-blue in colour. A stunning aquamarine, quite at odds with their environment. I later learned that, as the creatures matured, the males turned greener while the women became bluer, which seems accurate enough to me.

Then they started agitating inside their peculiar nest, jostling the as-yet unhatched eggs causing hairline fractures all over the place. At the sight of me these ferociously ugly children started to gnash their vicious, upward-turning tusks and thrashing about their many limbs. Very off-putting. Even at this size the creatures looked as if they could do a fair amount of damage.

I was so busy taking in all these fascinating details that I completely failed to notice the approach of a score of full-grown Nepotists from behind me.

Coming, as they did, over the soft and soundless moss, which covers practically the entire surface of Neptune with the exception of the seas at the poles and the scattered towns and villages, they might have captured me easily, but their intentions were far more sinister. It was the rattling of their sabres that gave me the tip-off.

It was the rasping, tinny sounds of their blades being produced that made me whirl around and face them. And what a sight greeted me when I did!

They were like devils, surrounding me. A party of full-grown Nepotists, each of them brandishing a sabre; each of them champing their formidable teeth and grinding their tusks.

I was in no doubt as to whom the leader was. He was up on a horse-type thing (quite blue too, with its head lowered and its hefty shoulders quivering in exhaustion). The leader looked absolutely piques with rage and it was his sabre that was rattling the most.

How vulnerable I suddenly felt! Undressed and quite alone!

This man, if I may call him that, had the usual extraordinary number of limbs and he was about fifteen feet tall.

Before any of us could say anything, we were interrupted by his horse-type thing suddenly opening its mouth and giving a dreadful yawn. And what a mouth! What a north-and-soulh! Its massive head seemed to crack right in two, revealing a bright white tongue and leathery, liquoricey lips.

I stole another glance, before all the inevitable questions started, and this beast had a strange number of legs as well. This seemed to be the tiling on Neptune. I tell abashed at having only four limbs on show.

Behind this first demon ranged nineteen others, similar in most respects, but,

as I learned later, there was quite a bit of variation. But I couldn't take it all in as I stared up at this nightmarish crowd.

I had to defend myself. That was the first thing.

This leader fella gave a jab in my direction with his sabre and, my reflexes working with astounding efficiency, I gave one of my fantastic little hops and jumped straight onto the crystal roof of the things with all the eggs in. Now at least I could face my aggressors eye to eye.

Their eyes were quite revolting, however. No two Nepotists had then) in the same place on their polished skulls, and there was a great variation in their number. Each eye was rheumy and yellowy and all were directed, somewhat harshly, at my person.

It was up on this slippery vantagepoint that I received my next surprise.

Each member of this hunting party was emphatically male. Each member was as naked as I was and each was in proud possession of precisely two equally proportioned members. My eyes nearly popped out of my head at this revelation. Let's say that my scientific curiosity was duly aroused.

I didn't have time to dwell on the singularity of their double-cocked nature because each of the twenty Nepotists, as of one accord, waggled their swords at me. I took fright and quite forgot myself; jumping backwards off the roof of the edifice, quite forgetting the nature of the local gravity.

I bounced backwards some thirty feet.

As I whizzed through the heady air I could see they were all amazed.

I dropped unharmed onto soft blue moss. I grunted and sat up, and watched them thunder towards me again. Some were staring at me in what I would like to describe as awe.

The others had trotted over to the incubator thing and seemed to be checking that I hadn't been interfering with the eggs. 'Of course!' I realised wearily. 'They're only worried that I wanted to steal their hatchlings.' Silly of them. What would I want with those hideous brutes? Now they were talking amongst themselves in low, guttural tones, and jabbing elegant, tapered blue fingers (each tipped in golden nails) in my general direction. They were deciding what to do with me.

As I listened I realised I could make out exactly what they were saying. I was glad. I hate feeling left out. One of those concerned for the hatchlings' safety came ambling towards his leader. "They're alright. She didn't touch them."

The leader fella snorted. "Just as well."

"They're starting to hatch. There are some perfect specimens. Little darlings."

The leader grunted again. “You needn’t get too attached.” Then he gazed suspiciously back at me. “But what are we going to do with this one?”

“She looks so old and haggard,” said one of his fellows (I bridled at this, but kept my mouth shut.) “She ought to be decrepit. How could she launch herself so high off the ground? How can she leap about like that?”

The leader looked thoughtful. “Either she is possessed of great powers,” he rumbled. “Powers which even we Nepotists have no inkling of. Or she comes from a different world.”

“A different world?” said the other, incredulously. “Surely you don’t believe in that stuff?”

The leader shrugged his various appendages.

‘They’ve got a nerve,’ I thought, ‘Thinking my being unlikely.’ And I pictured myself explaining to Harriet (Alas!) how I met men with multiple arms, all of bright blue, with twin tadgers each! Really, who was the preposterous here?

“Whatever she is,” said the beleaguered Captain from astride his even more beleaguered mount, “She’s unusual. And quite an interesting, unexpected catch. She’d be worth showing off.”

“Will there be a reward?” piped up one of his subordinates.

The leader gave him a withering glance.

I was starting to wonder who I would prefer to be captured by. These freakish men this morning; or last night’s ruffians? Blue Nepotists or scruffy Yorkshire villagers? In my mind the two parties were oddly linked and I couldn’t decide which fate was the most alarming. I was between the devil and the deep blue sea. Stuck between Scylla and Charabdys. I would just have to do what you always ought to do in situations that seem, at the time, to be insoluble; I would give myself up to the fabulous randomness of fate. Let the future decide for itself. And wait for a better opportunity to present itself. And then we’d see who was top dog.

Besides, they all had guns as well as sabres. They looked like old-fashioned blunderbusses and there was no way I wanted one of them shooting up my old arse!

The Nepotists, after they had chuntered on for a bit, deciding what to do, turned their horse things around and rode back the way they had come. After a few hundred yards they stopped and looked back at me. Their leader stayed with me.

‘Crumbs,’ I thought. ‘Now I’m for it.’

He grinned at me in an altogether ghastly fashion. I reciprocated nervously. It’s worth hanging onto your manners, I believe, no matter what the

circumstances are.

Then, in a single, graceful movement, he hopped oft his lizard-like mount and moved towards me on his three sturdy legs. I couldn't help myself shuffling backwards slightly. Nor could I forbear staring at his two astonishing penises as they swayed before my eyes.

Then he threw down his blunderbuss and his sabre. His meaning was plain. 'Thank buggery,' I thought.

He ambled closer in his lopsided manner and, as he approached, unfastened a golden bracelet from one of his surprisingly thin and elegant wrists. This he held out towards me.

"Would you take this?" he enquired in a far less guttural tone.

I beamed. "I'd be delighted."

For a moment he seemed taken aback that I not only understood, but could speak his language as well as him. However, with perfect breeding and good manners, he stifled his amazement and urged me to take his gift. Which I did. It was a lovely thing; all cool and quite supple to the touch.

"Thank you very much," I said, fastening the bracelet thing onto my own wrist and finding it a perfect fit. "I must say, it's really very good of you not to start shooting at me or tying me up or taking me prisoner. It's so nice to come across a truly civilised race. I am Iris Wildthyme. It's lovely to meet you."

He nodded stiffly, but didn't reply.

A tense silence hung between us. 'Maybe,' I thought, 'I've got the local protocol completely wrong.' It wouldn't have been the first time. I gave a funny little curtsey.

Then he gave the signal for his fellows to come back. It was as if I had passed a kind of test. They started towards us with a jubilant burst of speed, but were checked by another signal from their leader. I suppose he thought I might take fright and jump straight out of the picture again.

He didn't want to lose me.

Oh, I'm a silly old fool!

Such easy prey to flattery!

"Would you like to ride with us?" he asked, quite gently, and slapped the rump of his substantial mount.

I had to think twice about this.

I got on.

But I rode side-saddle, it has to be said.

It's Raining Again

Paul Magrs and Stuart Sheargold

The Queen of Spring in her counting house, totting up the drops that come, one by one, through the punched-in ceiling of her manor. Never quite a tumult, a deluge - not even a downpour, but listless and irregular, the rain trickles through her shatter-pated home.

She imagines the broken tiles above, gleaming like scaled flesh: she thinks of the glittering hide of the Summer King and his easy crocodile tears. She wonders about him, in that palace of his own not far from here, from which she, naturally, is debarred. Unless the sun comes out and then she may totter down to the very bottom of her garden... and, raising herself up on to the crumbling masonry of the garden wall, sneak a glimpse into his fields, the grass bleached and crisped to the colour of his hair.

She seethes, the Queen of Spring. She feels chilled and heady with yet another fever. She grimaces at the sound of the rain, spilling in modest torrents across her rooftops and with almost unnatural sensitivity. She can hear it touch each upturned leaf, each callow new shoot in her beleaguered province. And she can hear it patter on the hastily erected marquee tents outside.

Chatter and laughing and tinkling. Guests braving the season; her season. Waiting for her out there: the samovars piping hot, the fruits and fish imported from pleasanter climes. But she'll leave them for a while yet. They can get along without her for an hour or two.

Instead, she tip-toes through the delicate rubble to the swelling convexity of a balcony, blue with crepuscular light. She thinks of the girl Samelene, enclosed in the ice-blue pond at the centre of the garden. Frozen in the ambivalent ice, the flashes of purple fish and heavy orange crustaceans refract in her still, dewy eyes. A witch entombed her there. There was a season for witches, here; they swept in on slender branches, mobbed as crows. A tear slips and tumbles down the Queen of Spring's cheek. Her fever rises like a fervid heart.

Pale pink tulips sprout sparingly from the fertile earth between paving

stones. She once dipped these compliant flowers in the richest perfume - for they surely had none - and swished them across the feet of all her concubines, a lover's branding caress. A step rings out behind her in the vast counting house. The Spinster of Seasons: all powdered blue beehive-hair, senescious folds of canvas-skin. She places a weathered, consoling hand upon the Queen's brocaded robe, next to the heart. The Queen smiles gently, as if she would crack. She has done so before, with a porcelain-smash. She reminds herself that this is her twentieth season. Her twentieth renascent skin.

'Your Majesty,' she says in an elderly vibrato. 'You are very glum today. Why? You should be happy. All these people have turned out for you.' Here she pauses for breath. 'Shall I ready your Mask of Legendary Smiles?'

The Queen, bosom heaving at the presumption, looks askance at the Spinster, aware of the old lady's ambiguous, hooded eyes. She has become used to this insinuating manner. The Spinster's devotion to the Royal Keepers correlates necessarily to her own care for the seasons; only she can transgress the boundaries.

The Queen of Spring waves a regal hand vaguely. 'I have,' she says, and her voice umbellates from deep within her chest, 'been thinking of Samelene of late. And the Summer King. I wonder if he feels the same as I do. Does he blame himself?' She was not susceptible to bitterness and pondered how she might feel if she were.

The Spinster of Seasons turns to view the cornucopia of feeding below. Her naked skin billows like a galleon in full sail as it catches the breeze. The impeccably attired string quartet are playing out a frenzied Vivaldi, oblivious to the rain. Cold water streams down the cat gut, into the wooden bodies of the instruments; the swelling
beads sate some imaginable cedar lust. 'Your Majesty,' she begins, humbly, 'I have heard rumours of his sadness. He is said to be rather difficult as he is so sad.' She pauses, the air pregnant and portentous. 'He will not eat or sleep. He stares all day long out windows. Sometimes he whispers a word.'

The Queen imagines the swish and slap of the Summer King's tail as he trails along velvet-lined halls - his crocodile eyes blistering from so many tears, closing up from the grief of enchantment; his chaff-coloured hair flopped and limp. She wonders whether his scaled flesh is hard with

ridges, or soft like a baby's. She suddenly wishes for the rain to fade, so she can sneak away and peer into his butter-yellow fields, ripe with sun. His palace brims with minarets and cupolas in the inviolable shimmering distance.

'It is an odd word.' Pause, then: 'Sarn.' The Spinster spills the word from the balcony, relishes its sibilance.

'Sam,' says the Queen, quietly piqued all of a sudden. The summer word for her frozen lover, her companionable Princess.

'Here', says the Spinster of Seasons. And she picks out from beneath a luxuriant flap of skin and hands to Her Majesty the Mask of Legendary Smiles: a smooth and slippery arabesque mirror, shining with light.

The Queen gives a cry of child-like delight and peers at her lined and wise face. It is brilliant with a stretched smile, though she is not wearing one. She is happy for a moment, until she realises. The rain goads her into melancholy.

'Will you give my sympathies, my love, to the Summer King when you next see him?' A quick pause: 'And this.' She hands the Spinster a slim and ancient book, crumbling within its silky wrapping.

The Spinster of Seasons nods her acquiescence with a comforting smile. She leaves with a careful bow. 'I will, Your Majesty.'

The Queen of Spring, known for the meticulous disposition of herself, snatches a pink tulip and pins it on her bodice; she thinks of lips and past kisses. Her guests' laughter rises, as though at her insouciance; they are expectant for her entrance. But she will wait until the moment is perfect. It will be a long time yet. She numbers the days in molasses ink..

'Sam,' she murmurs, rolling the summer sound round in her mouth as the rain spills on endlessly.

He used to be all of pink and gold. He was a man in his prime, not quite thirty. His colouring reflected back succinctly that of his demesne: golden, overgrown hair that touched his collars, and a complexion that still bloomed like fruit - pinkening, blushing to the exact shade of the poppies all tangled and narcoleptic in the rank summer grasses. His eyes of periwinkle blue, shining with the afternoon skies, as he led his parties out onto the lawns - kitted out for a game he taught them, very slowly, throughout that last pleasurable summer. He wore striped trousers and a white shirt which, as the game went on, came untucked... and he was rumpled and smeared in livid green juices from the grass as he threw

himself down again and again, bemusing his guests, making the ladies modestly titter.

All that is finished with now, however. Pink and gold no longer, transmogrified hideously... slouching in the still sunny corridors of his palace, swishing that extra appendage around after him... this prodigiously glittering lizard's tail. His hide is changeable now; shifting like taffeta, inconstant as opal. His is a chameleon hide and its continuous alterations index his perplexing moods. A young man no longer, the King of Summer mourns for himself.

He looks so rough to touch. He oils his scales daily with ointments and balms which, somewhat churlishly, his red-haired servant - the boy Turlough - brings him from the marketplace. Muttering and cajoling bad-naturedly, the King's constant companion helps out with this time-consuming project of keeping the royal hide supple and soft. Turlough smarms him, alternately loving and hating the work - loving to be this close, keeping him in touch; despising all the while the fact of his subservience. Turlough
reminds himself, */ could have been sitting at the right hand of the Monarch of Winter, I almost made that transition...* But he loved too foolishly, and here he must work himself into the ground, full of gall and spleen and bile... massaging the heavy neck, the gleaming back, and the powerful thighs of his master. Just in case... just in case, one day, the young King finds himself transformed back into his original state. Even in the torpid pit of his despair, the Summer King knows he can't let himself go. To give up, and forget he was ever a young man, would be to consent to beasthood forever.

And so, when no one is looking, not even his manservant, he plays upon a harp, stroking out a rough kind of music in the hapless attempt to soothe his own animal heart. And he paints, and he reads. He reads Milton and Shelley and Blake, understanding less and less with each passing gloss.

This morning, as the red-haired boy is about his usual solicitous ministrations with the balm and a red rag of silk, the Summer King is interrupted. Never before has anyone seen fit to interrupt this ritual. Since his curious metamorphosis he has, indeed, very few visitors presuming to ring the ancient brass bell of the palace door.

He jumps up with a snarl, knocking the boy back and making the jar of

balm crash to the stone floor, where it bursts into a thousand and one viscid fragments.

'Get that,' commands the Summer King.

As the boy hastens to obey... on the doorstep, the Spinster gazes up at the neglected eaves of the palace; the matted and over-luxuriant growth of honeysuckle (its scent too ripe, too sweet) masking the building's crumbling facade.

The door bells open pendulously, inviting in the Spinster and all the decrepitude, the tannins of a much-maligned garden. Heaving, pungent perfumes sift the air like ghosts, but sweet also, in reminder of a long-ago lush and succulent epoch. She swaddles into the shuttered light of the palace. Oblongs of strong yellow punctuate the scarlet- swathed velvet length of the hall. The red-haired manservant, who she knows to be named Turlough, shuffles off down the hall, his hair momentarily spot-lit and cherry in each oblong chamber of warm sun. They wade through the luxuriousness of the palace: paintings with tantalisingly subdued orchard colour, expensive objets, deep dense mahogany furniture, all arched inwards like an arbour of art. It is as though she has stepped into the heart - all the preciousness imbibed is here. Yet it is not without its mustiness: the sun shines stubble into the ponderous gloom; it lies funereally on the crimped dust-sheets of more than one chamber.

The red-haired boy rushes through with barely a glance at the Spinster, expecting her to follow the established routine. The thick carpet is pliable. It knows their well-worn footsteps. He wonders what she will tell the Summer King on this impromptu visit. He does not trust her serenity, her satisfaction with the seasonal dissonances: underneath her farinaceous folds of skin lies a beguiling black soul, he is sure. Her eyes are smoke-dry and as ambiguously threatening as stunned bees.

And then the Summer King, resplendent in a gilded cloak of rich byzantine-amber; each panel reflects a season that he can know only through image, colour, and hazy remembrance. He stands from the clasping bulk of his chair, his scales spangling light across the room. They are wet and glistening with unguent. He crunches across fallen smashed glass.

'The, ah, Spinster to see you.' Turlough claps hands together at the pronouncement, gestures benevolently to grant audience with the King. He feels insolent.

'Ah, Spinster,' says the King, his mellifluous voice rich and angelic with soft cupid youth, sky-coloured eyes brilliant beneath his rumoured despondency, 'it's good of you to come. I rarely entertain a visitor these days.'

The Spinster feels warm and comfortable with the King, his atmosphere numbingly gentle, not at all like the sensitivity, the aggrieved melancholy of the Queen of Spring. 'I arrive with the Queen's tokens of love and sympathy. I had not planned on such a detour but I was in the vicinity; the Monarch of Winter has finally finished sculpting his Ice Palace and deigns to invite me to a soiree. He claims it will be more magnificent than any the Queen of Spring has given. Of course, as he relies solely upon my information, he cannot possibly know whether I tell the truth or not!'

'And do you?' says the Summer King, glancing at Turlough, who gives a look of rolled detachment. The boy bends and begins to pick carefully through the shattered glass. The pink drops of balm slip in glutinous strings to the floor.

'Sometimes...' says the Spinster mysteriously, a sudden sinuousness in her elderly step.

'And how is the Queen?' the King inquires; his tone has a hint of disapproval in it, as though, perhaps, the Queen were responsible for their misfortunes.

'She is as always, brooding and intense. She cares nothing for the upkeep of her season. She is constantly wearied by the unchangeable rain. She seems to believe that she was to blame.'

'Oh.' The Summer King is silent; he untangles his arm from the cool flesh of the Spinster and retires to his heavy throne, burdened with more than just his weight. He sits with a sigh of bereavement, hiding his sorrowful eyes with a glimmering clawed hand. The manservant glowers at the Spinster, at her tactlessness. He brushes by her to the coffered door; it opens on ancient hinges rimed with rust.

'I think perhaps you should go,' he says, with a forcible hand on the door, a narroweyed distrustful glare.

The Spinster whispers into the velvet darkness of the room a reverent 'Your Majesty,' and leaves. The manservant sees her down all the sloping corridors, through a panoply of plump paintings, to the recessed door. She thanks him for the indulgence, for their kind time. She takes from a corpulent pocket of skin a book thick with the mottled stains of

finger-oil and sweet saliva, cover crumbling its musty rind. She places it in Turlough's hand with an implied flourish, saying: 'From the Queen.' Indented in the cover, a stick of celery. A shock goes through his brain: he remembers the past.

The Spinster leaves, waddling through the furious plant-growth, snapping stalks with the brittle crack of her progress. Turlough watches for a moment, intent on her blue beehive, bobbing through the grass like a dancing animal. He remembers a time when the grass was cut toe-high, the scent of green, of chlorophyll.... a machine oily wetness saturated the warm air; the tick of the bat and the thunk of the ball on grass. He had enjoyed the simple pleasure of it all.

Beyond the vast expanse of the creamy fields, smoke rises languidly from the raucous marketplace, traders plying their foods and medicines and fine rugs with a customary cry of over-enthusiasm. Rich and heady smells permeate the air under the tents.

The Spinster has made her way to the crumbling wall at the bottom of the garden. Then the air opens, like cut flesh, and another season bleeds through. Turlough can see a glistening wet fleshy morass, tendrils slippery, snaking across veined walls, heaving and bloated, more scintillating than any vortex. Beyond this short gateway lies the glittering splash of icy blue Winter. The Spinster steps up and glides through, steps into the star-shining ice-Winter. The air gloops and coagulates and closes the rent.

Turlough is astounded; he has found the way out. Or at least the possibility of another season - the possibility of a prison-break, if they could discover a weakness in the wall. He remembers the day he walked for hours through the waving wheat and never found an end to it. This was a prison season, and the scornful heat of Summer glazed the air. Winter beckons him, but he turns back to Summer to tell the King of this significant news. Glancing briefly at the book, a slender volume, a note spills to the floor. It rests perfectly flat and he curls the corner to pick it up. It is a note from the Queen. He cannot read the scribbled spidery writing, replete with elegant loops and curlicues. He stuffs it in a pocket packed with notes to himself. This can wait. He wants to share the surprise of the Winter gate with the Summer King.

Inside, the Summer King is in a daze. He feels simultaneously depression and a glimmering of hopeful enthusiasm. His tail swishes,

sashaying the floor in tune to his perplexing mood; his hide shimmers with coruscating hues. Books mushroom the floor
around his throne. He tries to drink all the thoughts from them... he feels the universe contracting in his head. He decides to soothe this seething sickness with the gentle stroke of the harp; the strings stipple the air with honeyed sound.

His manservant, Turlough, gushing fast breaths, runs into the chamber. A book falls from under his arm. The Summer King, startled, ceases his playing immediately.

The King is annoyed at this disturbance, but his head is clear all of a sudden, his skin lustrous as chalcedony. He turns an enquiring head, insect-like.

'I think I've found a way out of here,[1] says Turlough. A pause for breath. 'Here, let me tell you.'

Every leaf has a future in it, every branch rinds with upward heavenly motion. The Duke of Autumn gently kisses the leaves from the boy's body; the dry twiggy roughness tickles his nose. As they fall they are caught in his black hat. He collects the future. The boy squeals again as the Duke plies a leaf from his body. The ropes tighten about wrists. The Duke begins to feel deliciously perverse.

'Another,' he demands and the boy weeps as another leaf is plucked from his trunk, withers, and feather-drops into the hat. The Duke wants to marvel at the boys roots, his wetness. But underneath he finds the weathered skin, and a strange symbol. A symbol of the future! It is a blue star, pinned onto the boy's skin. The boy writhes, will not let him have it.

'It's mine!' he shouts. But his mouth is cut with sharp twig.

The Duke plucks it from him and holds it up to the light. The dell is cut with swords of sunshine. The light strikes him and the boy made out of twigs.

The boy remembers a story he was once told by a wise young man with blond hair. The name 'Pinocchio' crops up in his memory. That was a boy made of wood. But why was he made of wood? He seems to have jumbled memories, as though his mind is a stall and someone with careless hands sifts and sorts through it, tumbling and piling. The star is the one thing he can grasp: it is important, it belongs to him. What does it represent? Sometimes he sees a white room indented with round-patterned walls. He squirms at the Duke's unpleasant plucking.

The Duke feels fortunate that he has caught this dryad. He has been hunting the boy since the crisp dawn. He flushed him out of hiding with his pouch of flames, his collection of heat from the summer season. His little secret he keeps from the Spinster. These elusive creatures are drawn from the trees when threatened with flame. Their faces push outwards into grotesque approximation of wooden bipedal shape. He needs them for the future. He knows that he is trapped in this prison season. He is cut off from communication; the banter and heckle of his depraved servants is a constant he is now inured to. He must, he must, see the future and has learned to take from the season all that he needs to alchemize an antidote, as it were. He toils and broils in the lab he has created under the abandoned monastery he loosely calls a home. He needs the boy's leafy skin for this - to see the way out, to thieve the key.

He had tried, once, to tuck himself into a fold of the Spinster's flesh, sure she couldn't possibly notice. She had dumped him on the threshold of his home, and huffed off with a curt reprimand. He dislikes her freedom.

The boy squirms and wriggles one hand from the rope. He feels he has been a prisoner before. A gleaming metal web spins in his head. He does not like it. But the Duke has not forgotten him, and a bunched hand comes down on his wooden head. He echoes throughout, and falls into a hard sleep as complicated as a walnut.

The Duke has his prize, and now an endless supply of fates and fortunes. He throws the wooden dryad across his horse, mounts, and gallops swiftly away into the slowly turning colours, the moulting forest. Leaves scatter and whirl at the clomp of the hooves.

He sweeps through the cold monastery halls, batting at his clingy irritating servants. They gabble and squabble about him, seething with libidinous intent. He makes his way down, down, down into his gloomy laboratory - sitting in the midst of the pungent
underground river that flows through the monastery, lit only with sparking flambeaux. The room hisses to itself in the language of alchemy.

He sits at a heavy table, laden with notes. He dumps his hat and the withered leaves onto the wood, then takes up a feather-pen. Papers shiver in fright from the black gum of his pen. He stabs them into submissiveness with his ink. He fills them with swirls and leaps of curled words, an alchemical mathematical language. When he reads it aloud, it sounds fat, glottal, and brutally Germanic. He translates the Autumn

season, the ridges of the leaves, into a hope of escape.

His depraved servants - corpulent and stinking like pigs - fawn and lick like eager flames about his legs. Occasionally, when not squealing innuendo, they bring him tea and biscuits.

This is his fourth time, and still he has had no luck. He rages, ripping and shouting incoherence, strewing the room with papers and smashed glass. Leaves tumble to the floor. Then he thinks. His cowering servants begin to pick up the pieces of his anger. Snatching up his purse of flames, he rushes out.

Immolation is a painful death of crisping and withering. The dryad boy will help him, he thinks.

An Unearthly Palaver

Paul Magrs

ONE.
IAN and BARBARA shuffle on, uncertainly.

IAN
Here we are, Barbara. Putney Common.

BARBARA
It's so foggy! Are you sure this is the right address, Ian..?

IAN
It's what the school secretary gave me. But she's not exactly reliable...

BARBARA
It seems like such a strange place to live. Where are the houses?

IAN
There's no sign of him yet...

BARBARA
Are you sure we're doing the right thing, Ian? Spying on one of our pupils like this?

IAN
I suppose we're just being nosey. The thing is, we're both curious and worried about this strange kid, aren't we?

BARBARA
You have to admit, his behaviour in the classroom is rather strange...

IAN
Strange isn't the half of it!

BOTH
WIBBLY MEMORY SOUND EFFECT

IAN
But... what do you mean you couldn't care less what the answer is?

PANDA

Because it's all bollocks, that's why! All this learning by rote that you've got everyone doing! Who's going to use this rubbish when they're grown up? No one, that's who!

IAN
Come on now, don't be a naughty little bear...

PANDA
Bear...!?!

ALL
WIBBLE MEMORY EFFECT

BARBARA
He was just as bad in my class, too. Why couldn't we learn about ballet or opera, he said.

IAN
Crikey!

ALL
WIBBLY MEMORY EFFECT

BARBARA
Because we're studying wars and Battles, Panda! This is *history.*

PANDA
Well, it's *rubbish.* I hate it. The historical episodes were always bloody boring. What about the sexy bits, eh? What about all the filth?

BARBARA
You've got a very bad attitude.

PANDA
Up yours, lady!

ALL
WIBBLY MEMORY EFFECT

IAN
I see what you mean.

BARBARA
That Panda's a proper handful.

IAN

Quick - watch out! Here he comes!

PANDA APPROACHES

PANDA
tum-te-tum-te-tum. Oh, what a lovely mysterious fog on Putney Common.!

IAN
Where's he going?

BARBARA
Follow him, Ian! But don't get too close…!

IAN

He once said he lives with his Aunty, didn't he? But there's no actual record of her name in the school files...

BARBARA
There are lights up ahead! Look! It's a... it's a...

IAN
It's a double decker bus!

PANDA
Iris..! Iris, I'm home! Get the fish fingers on!

IRIS
(Off) What? Who's that?

PANDA
Oh, open the door, you daft floozy. You know I can't reach the lock!

IRIS
(Off) Hang on, Panda lovey...

IAN
There's someone in there! A woman!

BARBARA
Is it this mysterious Aunty of his?

PANDA
Are we going down the boozer tonight, Iris?

IAN
Do you suppose she's a Panda too?

PANDA
Hang on! There's someone out here! SPYING on me!

BARBARA
He's spotted us!

IAN
We'll just have to brazen it out...

PANDA
Come on out and show yourselves! I'm not scared of you!

BARBARA
Panda, it's us, Mr Chesterton and Miss Wright. Your teachers from Coal Hill School...

PANDA
Bloody hell!

IAN
We've been rather concerned about you...

PANDA
What are you two losers doing following me home! *Help!* Iris!

BARBARA
Calm down! You aren't in trouble!

PANDA
Get away from me!

FX. DOORS FLY OPEN AND IRIS STEPS OUT

IRIS
What's all this racket outside? I'm trying to beautify myself in there.

IAN
What the devil is *that..?*

BARBARA
Oh! Are you... are you Panda's mysterious Aunty..?

IRIS
I am... Iris Wildthyme — Transtemporal Adventuress! And this is my home! What do you people want with us?

IAN
We are Panda's teachers and we're rather concerned about the quality of his homework lately...

IRIS
This is a bit kitchen sink drama, isn't it? Bloody hell, Panda! What have you dragged me into?

PANDA
I thought I was doing well in school! Better than all those dreary children! What a bunch of thickos!

IRIS
I knew I should never have let you start at that local school...

PANDA

Oh, but I love it, Iris! At last I belong somewhere! And there are sweets and crisps at playtime.

IAN
Look, if you're Panda's legal guardian, then we really must speak to you...

IRIS

His guardian? He's older than I am!

PANDA

Shush, Iris. Stick to the story.

BARBARA

We really would appreciate a word, Ms Wildthyme...

IRIS

Well, come aboard then, why don't you.

IAN

Into your... bus..?

IRIS

Ha! Of course! All aboard the Number Twenty-Two! Hurray!

Ding ding!

TWO.

SHUFFLING ABOARD THE BUS. IAN AND BARBARA ARE ASTONISHED BY THE INTERIOR

BARBARA

But it's... it's... so much SMALLER than it is on the outside!

IAN
And it's... it's... full of loads of old crap...!

IRIS
Hey! Enough of the personal remarks, lovey. This happens to be my little paradise. My gorgeous boudoir and salon.

IAN
Oh my god, how can you even live like this? It reeks of cheap booze in here...

PANDA

Hurray! Speaking of which, who fancies a little splishy splashy?

IRIS
Oh, yes, please, Panda lovey. These teachers of yours are giving me the right bloody arse ache.

PANDA

You should never have asked them in. Now they know about us.

IRIS
It was bloody parky out there. And you know what that mist does to my chest.

IAN
Look, you two are living like vagrants. I ought to report you to social services.

BARBARA
I think you're right, Ian. This place is a hovel. It's thick with dust.

IRIS
Social services!

PANDA
How dare you!

IAN
Where did you even get a double decker bus from?

PANDA
We nicked it!

IRIS
But it isn't really a double decker bus. It's a multi-dimensional time ship!

BARBARA
She’s out of her mind!

IAN
A multi-dimensional *WHAT.?!*

IRIS
Just like I said, buster. A time and space machine!

IAN
You mean this thing... *travels..!?*

IRIS
Well, it doesn’t roll along on wheels, you know!

PANDA

Yes, it does. It rolls along on wheels.

IRIS
You’re right! But that’s not all it does!

PANDA

This bus of ours slaloms through the vortex! It thunders through the multiverse!

IRIS

And we can go anywhere and in any time! *Hurray for us*!

PANDA

Not *quite* everywhere...

IRIS

Not the places where all my exes live. I keep away from those bits of history

PANDA

And there are quite a few of those...!

IRIS

Hannibal. Genghis Khan. Toulouse Lautrec. Alexander the Great!

BARBARA

Was he really Great?

IRIS

He was *fantastic.*!

IAN

You people are sodding crackers!

BARBARA

Look, Panda... this is a really lovely game that you and your Aunty are playing...

IRIS

Oh, ey up — she's trying to be *reasonable* with us...

PANDA

She's called Bahs. Isn't she fabulous?

IRIS

I used to have a beehive. In my last incarnation.

BARBARA

It's all a lot of fun... but you must both see that it's not really real... None of it is real...

IAN

I don't think you can reason with them, Barbara...

BARBARA

But we must! Don't you see, Ian..? We can't leave this poor little Panda in the care of a woman who's possibly demented...

PANDA

Oho! Did you hear that, lovey?

IRIS

The cheek of it!

PANDA

Ooh, Barbara! Why don't you look after me? Why don't you give me a little cuddle and cosset me? Take me to your bosom!

IAN

I think that Panda is a bit peculiar.

IRIS

Look, you two. There's a few things you've got to understand. Panda - fetch us drinks. They're teachers. They won't say no to booze

IAN

But it's a school night!

BARBARA

Shut up, Ian. I want a drink.

IRIS

Now, I've got a few things to explain to you...

IAN

Yes! Why are you living in a stolen municipal vehicle? Why are you dressed like someone out of their mind on cooking sherry has gone mad in a jumble sale? And what do you *mean* you can travel in time?

IRIS

We can! *Fabulously.*

IAN

But that's impossible! By all the known laws of psychics!

IRIS

Bollocks to that! Drink up, dearies!

BARBARA

I think... I think she means every word of it, Ian!

IRIS
Have you ever wondered what it's like to be wanderers in the Ninth Dimension? Have you? To be chucked out of everywhere?

IAN
What are you talking about?

IRIS
Look, if I could show you all the places where the deserts are blue and the mountains are scarlet and alien birds wheel through golden skies going *KKKLLLL .AAAAKKKK*

KKKLLLL .AAAAKKKK.. and all the off licenses are open all night... would you believe me then?

BARBARA
Could I have another drink, please? I seem to have finished this one.

PANDA
Of course, Miss Wright.

BARBARA
Call me Babs.

IAN
Barbara, stop it! You're encouraging them!

BARBARA
Don't you see, Ian? I think... I think they might be... *for real!*

IAN
What? Don't be ridiculous!

BARBARA
But what if... what if it was all real? Wouldn't that be *wonderful.. ?*

IRIS

Oh, it is! It's all VERY real lovey!

PANDA
See? Babs knows what's what! I always knew she would!

IRIS
And we can prove it to you!

IAN
Barbara, I don't like this... I think we should leave here at once and contact social services...

IRIS
Oh, loosen up, lovey. And watch this. I'm going to start up the engine... and take you all on a little trip!

IAN
What..?! We're not going anywhere with you!

BARBARA
Oh, yes please! *Please* do!

IAN
Barbara!

BARBARA

I'm sick of my horrid, narrow, boring life! I'm sick of my bedsit and beans on toast. I'm sick to the back teeth of all those bloody awful kids at Coal Hill School!

IAN
Barbara, you're drunk..!

PANDA
Hahaha! I knew she'd be a laugh!

BARBARA
Take us away, Iris! Take us away on your magic bus!

IRIS
Your wish is my command!

IAN
Noooo!

PANDA
Take us somewhere fabulous!

IRIS
Hahaha! Hold onto your hats, lovies! Here we go! *Wa-hey...!!!*

THE END

Hospitality

Paul Magrs

My fella works in TV. He's French and I might have said or you might have picked up, the thing I have for French fellas. I just think they're sexier. He works in TV and it's a different world to the one I know and not as glamorous as you might think. I can't be doing with the star system and one person thinking they're better than another. Because that's what TV is. It's all the star system.

Raoul, he's called. He knows for a fact his boss gave him that job because he's got a cool name. His boss, a queen with white hair and blue-tinted glasses, flicked through a heap of CVs and plucked out Raoul's. Cool name, he said to himself, and gave us a ring here at our flat. It was at exactly the right time, too. We'd been living off my signing-on money for six months. Raoul was getting twitchy. He's a media-type person. He needs to be around the TV world and watching it all day isn't enough. 'I'm on the wrong side of it,' he would moan, whenever I put This Morning on.

I like to help out. Too soft, my mam always said. So I agree to help Raoul out with the last show of the series. He organises the audience and his is a big responsibility. That's why he gets stressed and I have to watch out. But I like helping.

'It's not as if you're doing anything special on Friday,' he says. 'It'll be the same as any other day, won't it?' He reckons we should have a brass plate on our front door and it should say that his profession is a media person and that I am a waster.

Today I am going to be a body. It is Raoul's job to fill up the audience with the requisite number of bodies. He spent Saturday night up in Peterborough touring the gay clubs and pubs, taking down names and phone numbers. This is part of his job, to go round places and tell them he's rallying together a studio audience for Glamorama, the UK's first all-gay late night magazine show. They come in droves to watch the recording. Raoul's always off round the provinces at weekends, hunting out young, photogenic camera fodder. It turns out they can't use London gay people for every show. They used them for the pilot, apparently, and the Londoners cracked on they were too sophisticated for it. They talked loudly during recording, stood up to go out to the loo, and laughed

in the wrong places. So Raoul must go further afield, to places where the punters will be more impressionable.

At first it was a joke between us, that part of his job was trollopping round bars collecting phone numbers. Thirteen shows into series two and I know for a fact he's shagged at least twenty of the bums he's worked so hard to put on studio seats. This show is the first time I've been allowed near the studios. He's kept his worlds quite separate and I'm only going today because he's desperate.

I'm at Cleopatra's Needle and staring at the Thames, across to where This Morning is moving to, once they've left the Albert Dock in Liverpool. Coming south like I did.

This is the meeting point. A few slick dykes in satin blouses and chintzy leggings are sitting at the base of the needle. Older fags and sweetly trendy gay boys are gathering round. I've not made any special effort dressing up, even if it is for the telly. I know they like the audience to look glam and enthusiastic, but I've told Raoul flatly that I refuse to whoop. I watched last week's show and they have them whooping like anything.

A golden double decker bus stands ready and, on board, Raoul is talking with the driver. We are going to go out to an industrial estate somewhere beyond Mile End. He's seen me and he's barely acknowledged I'm here. He's in his silver suit and shades. When the coach doors whish open the sun is right on him; he shines and we all look. The papers strapped to his clipboard are ruffled and scribbled on already and his black hair is coming out of its perfect slick hold. He steps off the coach and surveys the small crowd. He's on his mobile to the producer, listening to what's happening with the Peterborough crowd. They've been drinking on the coach all morning and are going to arrive in a right old state. This is what Raoul tells me when he at last comes over to say hullo.

A dumpy lady comes over briefly with a clipboard of her own and tentatively asks our group: 'German tourist board?'

Raoul takes his cardboard sign from his briefcase. It says 'Glamorama!' and he shoves it roughly under her nose.

The crowd is bigger around us now and they are singing the theme tune to the show. Raoul glowers and asks me if I think they're taking the piss. I tell him I've bought him a mixed salad off a Greek deli on the Charing Cross road. He looks at the tin foil tray and, after a second, takes it off me.

We sit at a table right at the front of the coach and he picks at the salad as we drive off, talking on his mobile all the while.

We drive through South London. Upstairs they're all singing again. I'm hunting in Raoul's bag for his asprins as he says he's got a tension headache

coming on.

I'm staring at the black pencil moustache he's grown and thinking, he looks so professional.

When they sit us in the canteen the tables and chairs are very low and the walls are painted brightly. It's like we're in nursery school and soon someone will come round with pots of paint and sticky paper. They want to keep us occupied until the studio is ready. No sign of Raoul. He's off with the producer and now we've got three baby dykes looking after us. One of them, Ellen, knows who I am and she's latched onto me especially. She's in a black suit, with a phone of her own and her hair is bleached and glossy, cut in a fringe that flops over one eye. Every time she passes by she grins at me. She announces to the canteen at large that soon we'll have chilled lager. There is a cheer.

Do all these people know each other? I'm out on a limb while the others are bonding. On my table a couple have drawn a few others into their orbit and I'm the only one not joining in. They're going on as if this is a day trip and I suppose that's what it is. An older man and his boy, they're on about the new Doctor Who TV movie, and about how sexy Paul McGann is, and should you really want to shag Doctor Who?

At the next table all the boys are in acid-coloured terry-towelling tops and they are examining their passes for the day, checking that they all got the ones with free entry to Poptartz in Regent's Street tonight. Fags like a good bargain, I've noticed.

The women here are a good bit older and more settled-looking, except the smart-looking girls in their satin blouses. They are looking sceptically at the primary-coloured walls and furnishings. They could be trouble. They are talking about a video display in the corner: naked women swimming about underwater. Is that meant to be relaxing? 'I don't know how anyone could hold their breath that long ...'

Another woman sits alone, dressed as a nurse in immaculate white, the only one apart from me to be sitting alone.

Ellen comes swishing by. 'Message from Raoul,' she hisses. 'He says, if you definitely want to get your face in the picture, sit next to the black guy.' She nods towards one of the blokes talking about Doctor Who. 'It's awful, but it's true. Just a bit of advice.' Then she's gone.

When the lager arrives - scores of warm green tins of Kestrel - I go to fetch a bunch for myself and the loudest of the women in satin blouses invites me to join her gang. It turns out they're Lesbian Avengers and we get on great. They even ask me to attend a meeting some time. They say it's a laugh, but naturally I

won't be able to register full time.

When we traipse into the studio it's me and the Lesbian Avengers who piss off the surly floor manager, popping off to the toilets en masse. The whole of our front row vanishes, holding up the action. But it wasn't a protest walk-out, it was the lager.

Before lunch all they recorded were a few links. The presenter had a look of the young Roy Castle, only gay and less excitable. In between takes his voice was reedier and he came out with an awful joke about sanitary pads. He even called them 'fanny pads.'

'For Christ sake,' snapped Eliza, the loudest of the Lesbian Avengers. She was sitting next to me. 'You'd expect better than that here.'

For lunch: more warm lager and an assortment of salads on paper plates. Lots of quiche. We ended up crouched in a corner of the corridor, tripping up those on errands with our big clumpy boots. Eliza was telling me about her PhD, which was about - I think - images of women's drunkenness in contemporary women's writing.

'It involves a lot of psychoanalytical jargon,' she shrugged, licking a smear of dressing off her blouse's collar. 'I write these awful convoluted sentences and when I reread them I have no idea what I meant.'

We had to go out on the pavement so she could smoke. It was already busy outside. 'Have you noticed how most gay people smoke?' she asked. We were in a sun-bleached canyon between blank warehouses.

Then Ellen was with us, clutching her clipboard and mobile. 'Raoul wanted to join you for lunch,' she gabbled, flipping open her Marlboro pack to find it empty. Eliza nudged her arm with her own packet and Ellen gratefully accepted. 'This is Eliza,' I said. 'So where is he?'

Ellen rolled her eyes. 'We've lost some of the Peterborough contingent. Somehow they thought the star guest was Bette Midler. Someone's wires were crossed. So a gaggle of them have pissed off. Raoul's having to rustle up some new faces, sending out taxis to anyone we can think of. There's no one you can phone, is there?'

'How long have we got?'

'Fifteen minutes. We're sending out taxis.'

I shrugged. Actually, who did I know in London these days, apart from Raoul? It took something like this to make me see how isolated I'd become. If someone dropped a bomb on these studios now, I'd lose everyone.

'Shame about Bette,' I said, knowing for a fact it was Raoul behind the mix-up. He must have said it because I loved Beaches so much.

‘They’ve got some old lesbian novelist instead,’ Ellen shrugged.

I imagined the green room would have those mirrors all around the walls, each of them framed with a hundred watt light bulbs and the stars, smearing make-up off with wads of cotton wool, would mingle with staff and hangers-on, and champagne corks would bang and nibbles go round and music would play; raucous, impromptu, until the early hours. It was all very subdued, in a conference room with fat blue settees. ‘Matisse blue,’ Raoul said when he brought us bottles of Stella, fresh and sweating from one of the many tubs of ice.

‘It isn’t very showbizzy,’ I said, hating how ungrateful I sounded. I wasn’t meant to get Raoul uptight tonight. A show was in the can. It was his night to wind down. He had brought an audience to the peak of their performance; brought them to be recorded, had them clap and whoop to cue, and then dismissed them with consummate professionalism and cordiality. His day was complete. And here I was, looking sniffy.

‘You hate showbizzy things,’ he said. ‘That’s why you would never come here before.’

Eliza was at my elbow, taking one of the bottles. ‘I love anything a bit glamorous,’ she said. ‘Can you get me introduced to Iris?’

The lesbian novelist guest star was deep in conversation across the room with the producer and a woman from the Late Show. I introduced Eliza to Raoul and he put on that odd face he sometimes does when talking to women. Enunciating very carefully, as if she was deaf.

‘Are you here with one of the crew?’ he asked.

‘I just came up with your fella,’ she said bluntly. ‘He reckoned it would be all right.’ She was emptying the canapé trays as they slid past on the arms of bright, trendy young things.

Raoul gave me a look.

I said, ‘Eliza is a Lesbian Avenger,’ proud of my new acquaintance.

His mouth fell open. He has one ruby tooth and for the first time I thought it looked tacky, like a half-eaten spangle. ‘What are you doing, inviting just anyone up to the green room?’

‘She isn’t just anyone.’

‘No! She’s a Lesbian bloody Avenger! She’s not going to attack anyone or ... do a protest, is she?’

I shrugged and was about to say something when two of Raoul’s workmates came to join us. A boy and a girl in dungarees; his purple, hers blue. I was introduced as Raoul’s partner. It turned out that neither the boy nor the girl, he in lighting, she in guest-booking, were being paid anything at all for their forty

hour weeks. Like Raoul, they were doing it for the training, for the foot-in-the-door. As they talked to me I found myself blushing because they talked quite posh.

'Well!' said the boy who did lighting. 'A man! Your partner is a man!' He chuckled and clapped Raoul heartily on the back. Raoul smiled and I was surprised. He hates anyone touching him. Even I have to approach fairly cautiously, both hands in view.

'Well...' said Raoul.

'We had a running debate in our office,' said the girl from guest-booking. 'About whether you liked girls or boys and I must say, we thought you'd be all for the girlies. Just something about you. But it's all right. Don't fret.'

'Thought you were straight as anything,' shrugged the boy.

'Hang on,' I chirped up. 'I thought this was a gay show. I thought you were all queer. Wasn't that the point?'

They blinked.

Raoul turned to me, about to say something.

'My mother's a lesbian,' said the boy who did lighting. 'I think that gives me an insight.'

'Well,' I said.

'I grew up with my mum and her lover and my three gay sisters,' he said. 'So I guess I count as gay-friendly.'

The girl who booked guests added, 'Anyway, Queer is a point of view, isn't it?'

Raoul was still looking at me, as if to say, 'See?'

I looked round to see where Eliza was. She had crammed herself between the lesbian novelist guest and the Late Show presenter. She was explaining something, waggling her hands about. I tried to listen in and overheard what I thought must be one of those unreadable sentences of hers.

Raoul had flung himself on one of the deep Matisse blue sofas, between his two straight workmates. He looked despondent, and as if he'd abandoned me for the time being. The party around me was buzzing and I was grateful for the better quality lager. I shuffled off to find someone else to talk to, thinking I could get a cab home to Kilburn if I needed to. I had about fifteen quid. Raoul could sod off. I heard that lass sitting next to him talking about a Greek-looking bloke across the room. 'Ohh, he should model. Do you think he knows he should model? I'd say it was a waste, him being gay, but I suppose someone's getting the benefit.'

If I'd been Raoul I'd have yelled at her: Of course he knows he should model. The Greek-looking bloke was one of the audience and he'd smuggled himself

into the green room and was networking like crazy. He was going to seduce the straight producer and get himself into the biz. He'd told me at the urinal. Raoul was nodding and smiling at the girl from guest-booking.

I caught up with Ellen, who was hanging out of the window, blowing her smoke into the night. 'I'll get sacked if I smoke indoors,' she said. 'Mind, they're paying me bugger all.' She had glittery sunglasses, which I took off her to try.

The studio building backed onto a detached suburban house with a paddling pool in the garden. 'Is this a residential area?' I asked. It turned out that the house was where they broadcast Morning Quickie from. A raucous and relentlessly up-tempo breakfast show. The garden with its oversized props and colourful banners looked desolate in the dark.

'This is all shit,' Ellen said suddenly. 'I want to make films. Proper films that take risks with non-linear narrative. I want to make proper lesbian pornography!' She was becoming inflamed. 'That's exactly what I want to do. Who else is doing that? And no one will give me the chance or the funding. You have to go out and get it for yourself.' She looked around the green room. 'And here I am.'

The Roy Castle-lookalike presenter was talking to the Greek-looking bloke. Raoul was poking his nose in there, too. I was past caring.

'Last week,' Ellen carried on. 'We had Liza Minnelli on the show. Big flaming scoop.'

'I love Liza,' I said, grabbing some chicken tikka as it went gliding by.

'And they treated the audience like shit,' Ellen scowled. 'Liza was too sensitive to let anyone see her getting in or out of her bloody chauffeur-driven Daimler. Everyone was hanging around outside smoking. When the Daimler arrived we had to corral everyone back indoors so they wouldn't look at her. Put out your fags everyone - Liza's here. I got into a fight with a Glaswegian woman who wouldn't be told she couldn't smoke. Her skinny little girlfriend was shouting, 'Aye, but she'll no' last ten minutes withoot a smoke!' All day long it was in and out of the studio like the hokey sodding cokey. All because of Liza Minnelli.' She tutted. 'You're lucky we had a crap guest this week. Someone who doesn't give a shite who sees her.'

I smiled. 'Eliza's into her.'

We watched Eliza, hands on hips, head thrown back, laughing at whatever the elderly novelist was saying. It struck me then that Eliza had a Liza Minnelli haircut. 'Apparently she did part of her research on that woman's books, and she's never met her before.'

Ellen slugged back her lager. 'The dressing room was left in a shocking state.

Writes on anything she can find. She's a compulsive.'

In fact, as we watched, the woman was scribbling absent-mindedly on a small pad. She nodded and talked with Eliza and wrote busily the whole time.

'Your friend's gorgeous,' Ellen said. 'She is a dyke, isn't she?'

I smirked. 'Of course. But are you?'

She rolled her eyes. 'I see you're finding out that queers aren't always what they seem.'

'I'm just relieved to find a genuine one.'

'Well,' she said. 'That's debatable.' Then she added, 'What are my chances of shagging Eliza this evening?'

'Shall we ask her?' Feeling reckless as I led Ellen across the room, right under Raoul's nose.

It turned out that Ellen lived in Cricklewood, so when the three of us ordered a taxi down in reception, it didn't feel as if I was really abandoning Raoul for the night. Ellen's was only about a mile down the road from home. I was going back to carry on drinking and might be home by two or so. I don't think he even saw me leaving the green room.

Eliza, Ellen and I sang Carly Simon in the back of the car all the way to Cricklewood. The driver asked where we had been and Eliza said Glamorama! and he had never heard of it.

'I hated leaving Iris alone in the studios like that,' Eliza said as we hit Kilburn. I watched the turn-off to mine and Raoul's street go by, between Iceland and the Funeral Director's. Eliza was right; it had been sad to see the elderly novelist of world renown waiting alone at reception for a ride to Camden. She huddled against the wall in her army greatcoat and sucked on her fag. 'Don't mind me,' she rasped. 'I'll get the second cab. Get yourselves to Cricklewood and do some serious drinking for me.'

Eliza was beautifully gallant. 'Come with us and drink for yourself!'

Iris waved her ravaged hands. 'Oh no. I've a motorcyclist coming at seven tomorrow morning to take away the manuscript of my new novel. I've still got a final chapter to write. I shall be up all night, pounding away.'

Ellen snorted with laughter, but Eliza gave the woman a solemn hug, just as our cab arrived. When we climbed in, Raoul appeared, breathless. 'Where the hell are you going?'

'Cricklewood,' Iris told him.

He snapped at her, 'Why aren't you being looked after?'

She smiled. 'That's what I ask myself every day.'

'I mean, hospitality.'

‘I think it’s ran out,’ Iris said glumly, and that was when our taxi roared off into the night.

Eliza was saying, ‘She’s a great writer,’ and shaking her head, as if she couldn’t believe she had met her in the actual, raddled flesh.

We stopped singing and Ellen was just staring at Eliza, across my lap.

‘Is this it?’ asked the driver. Ellen darted a glance out of the window.

‘This is it.’ She said to us, ‘My flat mate’s back from Ibiza tonight, and it’s her flat, so we can’t be too drunken. She’s a bit straight. None of the decor is mine.’

We were sitting in the poor cow’s kitchen when she came in, just after one in the morning. We had Marks and Spencers’ spring rolls and slabs of eggy bread spitting away in the wok, three bottles of wine open and iced coffee in frosted blue glass. I’d already smashed a plate that Ellen swore blind dated back to the l930s.

‘It’s her own fault,’ Eliza said. ‘Look, she’s got all her good crockery jammed into that little cabinet. It’s an accident waiting to happen.’

All the same, I jumped and felt sick when I knew Sabrina, Ellen’s flat-mate, was coming up the stairs.

‘She must have been round her friend’s house,’ Ellen said, looking stricken. ‘God, have I got it all tidy enough?’

I felt that if I stepped off my tall stool I would topple straight onto the lino.

‘Woo-oo!’ Sabrina called as she stepped into the hallway. ‘I’m home!’

Taking a deep breath Ellen went to meet her. She shouted in a squeaky voice how brown Sabrina looked. Then she came through, helping to carry bagloads of groceries.

I thought: twelve hours ago I didn’t know any of these people.

I looked at Sabrina. She was my age and she owned this whole flat. She worked in a supermarket but she suffered terrible debt to live in a place like this, of her own. As we made clucky noises of welcome and introduction I felt a shove in my chest. It was me, giving myself a pang of jealousy.

She had the place lovely. At least, all in her own taste. I suppose it was a bit overdone. Distressed paint on every wall: tangerine living room, scarlet bedrooms, navy hallway. A seashore motif ran right through, in the form of golden shells and mermaids nailed to the paintwork. Sabrina was on her knees, packing her fridge. Her smile hardly wavered as she moved aside the meagre, spoiled rations I presumed were Ellen’s. I recognised those offerings from my own fridge. I know the eating habits of those who work in TV.

‘How was recording today?’ asked Sabrina brightly.

‘Oh, marvellous,’ said Ellen. ‘The audience was shit. They hardly reacted at all. We had a shit guest as well. But it was fine.’

‘Weren’t you two in the audience?’ Sabrina asked me and Eliza.

‘Yes.’ I looked at Ellen. I hadn’t realised we’d been so bad.

‘Look at my photos of Ibiza!’ Sabrina said and delved inside her bag. She produced a brick-thick wodge of pictures. Matisse blue water. discos, Sabrina and her best mate snogging German boys with pony tails.

‘I’m bushed,’ Sabrina said and went off to the shower, leaving us to look at the rest of her pictures. I sat back on my stool. I’d seen enough. Eliza and Ellen were leaning in closer over the breakfast bar, but then, I noticed, only so Eliza could give Ellen a gentle neck rub. Should I leave the room? I went to switch the rings off the cooker.

‘Does your landlady know you’re a dyke?’

‘I told her just before she went to Ibiza,’ said Ellen, rotating her head. ‘She was cool.’

‘Will there be a problem with me staying?’

‘I should think not.’

I had started washing dishes, trying not to listen.

When I turned back, they had gone. And the door to the room down the corridor was shut.

I finished washing and drying and thought, I’ll just slip out and find my way back to Kilburn. I dried my hands and checked I had everything. I had an odd impulse to steal something. I took one of Sabrina’s pictures from Ibiza. Don’t ask me why. One of her and her best mate, with hangovers at the airport, about to leave, snogging their serious German boyfriends.

The door was locked. A fearsome series of bolts and devices secured it.

Sabrina’s bedroom door was open, her light still on. She lay face down on her duvet, still wrapped in a white towel, another turbaned around her head. Out cold.

I went to lie down on the squashy settee in the living room. Maybe I could just pretend to fall asleep.

I lay down on the settee and wondered if I could climb out over the balcony and down three storeys. Find myself lost in Cricklewood.

I fumbled through Eliza’s handbag. Tampons, sunglasses, Dictaphone, an incomprehensible journal. That spray that goes in the faces of rapists. A copy of The Nylon Jungle, a novel from the Sixties by that woman on the show today. Eliza really was a fan. I read the first couple of pages - it was rubbish - before I noticed that the writer had signed it for Eliza and put her address and phone

number on the inside cover. She must have done that in the green room. People get up to all sorts while you think you're watching closely.

I dragged the phone over to me and, resting it on my chest, dialled the number. It was one of those black, heavy, l950s phones.

'Yes? Hello?' She snatched it up and shouted into the receiver.

'We met today at the studio today,' I said. 'Is that Iris?'

'I remember, darling, how are you?' she barked. Her accent was posher than I remembered.

'I've got something on my mind,' I said. 'And I thought you might be able to help.'

She took a long, deep breath and lit a cigarette. 'Ordinarily, yes. But tonight, as you may remember, I'm in the middle of my final, piss-bloody-awful chapter.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Never mind. I'm wedged in a gap between paragraphs and the motorbike boy isn't due for a bit. Go on, darling. Tell me anyway.'

I imagined her lying under a pink bedspread, like Barbara Cartland in Camden Town, a poodle either side and a typewriter on her lap.

'It's about my boyfriend,' I said. 'What am I meant to do about him? What do I do about Raoul?' Then I burst into tears. I was pleased I was on the phone and not in real life. I hate people seeing me cry. Also, this was a woman I needn't see, ever again.

'Is he treating you badly?' she asked.

'Well...'

'I know. By now, you can't tell anymore.' She sniffed. 'Well, I saw him about in the studios today, in the green room, and he certainly wasn't treating you right.'

'You saw him?'

'Chap in the silver suit? Little 'tache? Thinks a lot of himself?'

'That's him.'

'I talked to him after you left with your glamorous pals in the taxi. We talked about you.'

'Raoul talked about me?'

'Now, now.' I could hear her smirk. 'Listen, lovey. Sometimes you're best off without a person.'

'I should pack him in? Is that what you mean?'

'I'm not saying that. I don't give advice.'

'Tell me!' I was going to cry again.

'The thing is, lovey ... you need pals as well as lovers. He needs to be your pal

as well. Is he that?'

'No,' I said miserably. I surprised myself.

'If you weren't lovers, would you want to know him? Would you go out of your way?'

'No,' I said again, more surprised.

Over the phone from Camden Town Iris gave an audible shrug.

I said a garbled goodbye, promised to ring again, and even to read one of her books, right to the end.

Then I jumped up, turned on all the lights, flung open the French windows. I shinned down three balconies and all the clinging creepers. I found myself in dark suburban gardens.

It's funny that I never panicked. I kept on wandering round and all the streets looked the same. I forgot the name of the street I was looking for, that would get me back to the main road that led to Kilburn High Street. All the neat, high hedges were cold with dew. At first it was like an optical illusion, but it was getting lighter. What time was it? Had I walked all night?

I came out in sweats of panic once in John Lewis'. I'd gone in the ground floor and up and up on the escalators. It was winter, I had a big coat on, and I couldn't find the exit. That was like suffocating. Then Raoul found me, at last, in household goods, having an attack and pretending to look at kitchenware. He's very good with me when I have attacks like that. At those times he's very kind and careful. It's only afterwards he takes the piss out of the things I panic over.

When I got lost in John Lewis' he was laughing because I cried in his arms, in front of everyone. I was saying how beautiful the jars of olive oil were; the ones with the small trees inside.

Still nothing familiar in sight. It's almost completely light. A milk bottle blue, still hours before milk gets delivered. It's leafier, the houses more run down, as if I've wandered as far as the countryside, though that isn't possible. I figure that if the place is looking shabbier, then I must be closer to home.

When I see someone walking ahead on the long, hilly road, I do that brave thing, when you decide you're going to ask a stranger for some help. When I get closer I have second thoughts because he looks a bit rough and he's walking funny. Then I'm level with him and looking right at him and I've no choice but to ask now.

He's a tall, skinny bloke all in black, with a heavy metal t-shirt and studded leather fingerless gloves. His face is grey. Even his eyelashes look grey.

'How are you doing, buddy?' he asked as we fell into step with each other.

‘Where are you from?’

‘Kilburn,’ I said, amazed at how cheerful I sounded.

‘I’m Tracey. I’m from Los Angeles.’

He talked very slowly and it was all slurred. He talked as if we were both just travelling along and this was how you talked to people you bumped into on the way.

‘I was on holiday in your beautiful city, but four days ago some asshole hit me over the head with a steel bar and stole my wallet. Now I’m on the streets.’

We were walking as if one of us knew the right way.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked. Shouldn’t he have been in hospital?

‘I haven’t eaten for three days or slept for two nights and, considering that, I’m holding up pretty well.’

He looked like he’d set himself an interesting challenge and was coming through ok.

‘I’ve got no money,’ I said, and it was true. All my money had gone on the cab to Cricklewood. We’d said we’d sort out fair shares when we got there, but we’d forgotten. Tracey still had his Walkman headphones in his ears, held in place under a little leather cap. Their leads trailed uselessly over one shoulder. His shoulders were bare, lightly muscled and dusted with freckles. He was shuddering from the dewy cold.

‘Listen, that’s all right, buddy. You on the streets, too?’

I snorted. ‘Tonight I am. I’m trying to get back to Kilburn.’

By an all-night garage we turned a corner and there was the High Street, suddenly open to us. A wide, empty street of Irish pubs and Halal butchers.

‘Well, bugger me,’ I said, and laughed. ‘That was good.’

I had stopped moving and Tracey went plodding on. If he stopped he would never start up again.

‘Hey, Tracey,’ I called, catching up outside the Irish baker’s, which was just opening. You could smell the fresh rolls. As he turned to face me the smell must have been breaking his heart.

I said, ‘I live round here. Come home for breakfast.’

Iris Explains

Lance Parkin

'Doctor, hello.
Darling.'

The Doctor didn't notice the bus. Not at first. In a few seconds time, he would see it -- a huge gleaming old-fashioned red London double- decker bus sitting on his drive, as resplendent as all those adjectives would suggest. It would be later still, almost an hour, before it occurred to him that it couldn't possibly have fit through the iron gates to get onto the drive. And it would be a day or two later, after the bus had gone, that he would notice that there were no tyre tracks in the gravel. Such a state of affairs would have seemed impossible to most people. But even as he didn't see the tracks, if you get my drift, the Doctor would come up with three perfectly good theories as to how the bus had got, then how it had ungot, there.

The least likely explanation -- that the bus had just appeared out of thin air - was the only plausible one. Where was the crane?

Why would a bus just fall out of the sky? But that didn't concern the Doctor at that moment, and it needn't concern us. His attention was drawn to the woman, for reasons which will soon become apparent.

When Miranda saw her -- which wasn't for a minute or two --she would immediately recognise the woman. It was, after all, the mid- eighties, give or take a year. Jane Fonda's workout book sat unread on four million coffee tables. And this woman looked remarkably like Jane Fonda. In all the universe of time and space, there weren't actually that many places where people would remark on the similarity. A few decades of Earth's history. Even then, not everyone on Earth would make the connection.

But Miranda would.

When Iris saw Miranda, by coincidence, she would also see a strong resemblance to a film star. At sixteen, Miranda bore a striking resemblance to the young Jodie Foster. Miranda often got told she looked like her, although she was taller, and had blonde hair.

Fortunately, for the sake of all concerned and the maintenance of the suspension of disbelief, neither Iris nor Miranda had seen *The Monocled Mutineer*, and none of them ever watched BBC 1 on Saturday evenings.

The Doctor looked the woman up and down. She had cascades of golden hair, big brown eyes and full lips. But even the Doctor was paying more attention to her outfit. It looked like it vas made from crocodile skin, but -- for a very good reason -- that the crocodile in question had come from a place where the crocodiles were made from florescent PVC. Perhaps with a nod to animal rights, there wasn't very much to the outfit. Her arms were bare, and the skirt stopped... well, not to be indelicate, but it ended with a fringed hem that petered out barely below her waist, making her long legs look almost unreasonably long. Most men would have noticed that the skirt hardly concealed her rather special knickers, but the Doctor may not have done - who can say what he thinks? She wore matching calf-length green boots, which looked relatively practical by comparison.

'Do I know you?' the Doctor asked.

Had anyone else asked, this would have been a rhetorical question. But, for reasons that will shortly become transparent, the Doctor genuinely didn't know the answer.

Iris Wildthyme laughed warmly, then introduced herself. 'You had better come in,' he suggested. It was only then that he noticed her suitcase.

She dragged it into the hall. 'This is a lovely place,' she told him. 'Still got the police box, I notice.' She jerked a thumb over her shoulder back towards the garden.

'You know about that? What is it?'

'Oh dear, it really is serious amnesia, isn't it? You're prone to it. aren't you, m'dear?'

'Am I? I've forgotten.'

Iris clapped her hands together and laughed. 'But you've not lost your gift for a witty comeback. Excellent! Oh yes, this is the -- what? -- third time you've lost your memory, isn't it? Or is it the fourth? I forget. You'll get a reputation, you know. People always like a quick description: 'the one with a shock of white hair', 'the one with the recorder', 'the one who was only in a charity thing for a few seconds but was the best of the damn lot'. You'll be 'the one who loses his memory all the time' if you're not careful. I say ... who's this?'

It was Miranda. She'd come downstairs from her room after hearing the commotion. And you know what she looked like, because I've already

described her.

'School uniform,' Iris said, nudging the Doctor. 'You always had a thing for it. All those companions dressed to look half their age. This one's no different. How old are you, love? Twenty seven going on fifteen? You don't have to do what this horrid man says, you know. What's your name?'

'I'm Miranda.'

Iris shook her hand vigorously. 'Pleased to meet you. Do you have a surname, or are you one of the ones that doesn't?'

Miranda told Iris her surname. Now, don't get upset, or write letters, but what she said was: 'I'm Miranda Who. The Doctor's daughter. I'm wearing a school uniform because I've just got in from school.'

Iris looked at her, then looked at the Doctor. 'Great Gallifrey!' she said, then clamped her hand on her mouth. 'Sorry. Not allowed any more. Rassilon's Rod! No ... er gorblimey flipping 'eck, professor. Does that count as one?' she asked, looking up at the ceiling.

The Doctor frowned. 'One what?'

Iris shushed him, and hesitated for a moment. 'No. Got away with it. Daughter, eh? That's got to be quite a story. One unsuited to the short story medium, I would wager.'

'It would take a whole book,' the Doctor agreed. 'Or at least the first hundred and twenty nine pages or so of one, to get to this bit. I'll explain later.'

Iris beamed. 'I'm sure you will. I was forgetting your *other* reputation. You know,' she nudged him. 'The one that ... y'know.'

'I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about.'

Iris tapped her nose. 'Mum's the word about her mum. I'm not here so you can explain things to me, I'm here to sort a few things out for you. Tie up any loose ends. Jog the memory. You're caught on Earth at the mo, aren't you? Have you got the note?'

'You know about the note?'

'I know the man who wrote it. In fact I very nearly had carnal knowledge of him. He spent a very long time trying to get into my knickers.'

'Perhaps he was just after the diamonds,' said Miranda, who had noticed, even if the Doctor hadn't, that Iris's pants were black satin, studded with just the right number of gemstones, whatever that number may be.

'Oh no, his intentions were entirely dishonourable,' Iris told Miranda, making her blush. She was so embarrassed, in fact, that she didn't ask her next question -- *why are the diamonds arranged in a question mark?* -- and so she

never discovered that they'd been a gift from a gentleman admirer. Neither did Miranda ask her third question, but that was just a flippant one about washing instructions and garment care.

Iris returned her full attention to the Doctor. 'I can tell you everything you're a bit hazy on.'

'Er ... will that take long?'

'Oh yes. Weeks, probably. Have you got a spare room?'

'Six.'

'Oh. Shame. Come on, then, let's get cracking.'

Ten minutes later, Miranda brought a tray full of tea things into the front room. On it were an antique pot, cups and saucers in the finest bone china, and some Kipling cakes, which the Doctor was rather partial to. Don't worry, that's not a continuity reference or an in-joke, no need to look it up. He just liked the taste.

The Doctor and Iris were on the sofa, and while most men would be looking up Iris's skirt, the Doctor was just looking puzzled.

'So did that happen or not?' the Doctor asked.

'Did what happen?'

'Well, if time wasn't allowed to run its true course, then that means--'

'Do you honestly not know what a paradox is?' Iris asked, exasperated. 'They were *called* Paradox. Wasn't that a big enough clue? Really, I didn't think I'd have to explain all the big and difficult words to you.'

'A self-contradictory or seemingly absurd statement,' Miranda declared.

'Exactly,' Iris concluded smugly.

'So you're saying what happened was self-contradictory?'

'Yes. Unequivocally.'

'Unequivocally paradoxical?' Miranda asked. 'Isn't that itself a paradox?'

Iris beamed. '*She* understands, you see?'

'I don't,' Miranda admitted.

'But you do. Don't you see? It makes no sense, it makes sense, get used to it.'

The Doctor scowled. 'Look can we go back a bit?'

'If you want. How far back do you go, Doctor? I'll take you back. Back to your beginning! Back! Back!'

'Why are you waving your arms like that?'

'Just adding to the atmosphere, Miranda, dear.'

'Why did I lose my memory?' the Doctor asked.

'Ah.' Iris shut up, for possibly the first time since she'd arrived.

'That's all I want to know,' said the Doctor. 'A blow to the head? A psychological trauma? Some sort of machine that worked as a mind rubber?'

'Well, none of the above. You just sort of did.'

'*Just sort of did*?' the Doctor echoed. 'That's not an explanation at all.'

'Look, I don't know about that bit, to be honest. I'd got confused by then, and I think I might have skipped a few bits. It's got something to do with the choice you made. When you fought the Grandfather.' Miranda laughed. 'My dad beat up a pensioner?'

'No,' the Doctor said, 'he wasn't really a grandfather. He was me, but me with short hair. I think.'

'For the last time, it wasn't just the hair. He was a future you. An evil you. Only that future doesn't happen, now. He might have been you from a parallel universe. Obviously he was from a parallel timestream, one that no longer happened, but he may have been a you from a parallel timestream *within* a parallel universe where things happened differently, until, of course, you did whatever you did so that they happened the same. But that itself may have originally been a distinct parallel continuity, one where you lived at home and mourned for your dead wife. If the Grandfather wasn't that you, then he certainly went to the same barbers. But the status of that you is still up in the air. I had thought he was a future you, but events have rather ruled that out. Unless events transpire to restore, y'know, *thingy* but if that - happened you would almost certainly not be you any more.

You'd be that new you. But that you wasn't an evil you. So that you may have been a version of one of the origin story ones, you know, the one where Borusa's your spirit guide. That would make him -

- you, that is, or rather that particular you, not you you -- a pre- canonical you, rather than a post-canonical one. Assuming of course that he's canonical in the first place. But we have to assume that, otherwise you might as well say that nothing need make any sense at all.' Iris clarified helpfully.

'Heaven forfend,' the Doctor replied. 'So who's Izzy again?'

Iris rolled her eyes. 'Forget Izzy. Forget Charley. Forget Benny ... no, wait, remember Benny.'

'I don't remember Benny,' the Doctor said.

'Right. Well which one don't you remember?'

'Pardon?'

'It's OK if you don't remember the one that went to Guernsey without you. It's OK if you don't remember the one that travelled with you you, except for that one time in 1997, who you dropped off at Dellah in 2593. I'm not sure where the one who fought the Scourge with you fits in. You can probably remember that one if you want, I doubt it really matters.' Iris turned to Miranda. 'I've just had a terrible thought. Your mum wasn't called Benny, was she?'

'Benny's a woman?' the Doctor asked.

'Doctor, you had thirteen children with her, and you don't even -- forget I said that. You didn't do that. You didn't even ... oh wait, you did. The once. Or was that in a different bottle altogether?'

'Bottle?' Miranda asked.

'I'll explain later,' Iris said cheerfully. Then her face fell. 'No, sod that, I never understood all that business with the bottles. Forget the bottles. Forget most of the Bennys. A quick rule of thumb -- if she doesn't look like Emma Thompson, you can forget it.'

'Well, that certainly helps,' the Doctor said sardonically.

'That's what I'm here for,' Iris replied. 'Miranda dear, could you pour that tea? I think we're in for a long night.'

Faking It

Philip Marsh

Damn!

Erica's alarm has been beeping for half an hour before it wakes her. She still has to wash off last night's make-up, on top of everything else. She is going to be late for work.

The morning intrudes through her thin curtain—she had shut it before going out last night, knowing that she would probably be too tired to remember to do it when she got home. She forces herself out of bed and heads for the shower. A few minutes later she emerges, looking slightly more awake, dries herself and slips into her uniform, before giving her dirty-blonde hair a quick going over with the hair-dryer. Finally, she shrugs on her jacket and literally runs out the door, slams it to make sure it is properly shut, then locks it behind her. Her clock reads 6.30.

She is fifteen minutes late. This means the loss of half an hour's pay because they round up.

"Erica Marshall, if you're late again there'll be someone else cleaning them toilets this time next week," says Rob, the squat supervisor with the BO problem. Somehow, he makes it sound like a threat. Somehow, she is able to take it as one.

She squirts Toilet Duck around the rim like she does at this time every morning (well, normally fifteen minutes earlier). Then she checks the sinks, hoping that no-one has vomited in them since they were last cleaned. This morning she's in luck. She squirts some multi-purpose cleaner onto a sponge and wipes the white ceramic. The label on the bottle promises that after use the surfaces will shine, a star of cleanliness burns brightly off the edge of a tap. Somehow her taps never shine like that. Finally, she cleans her first floor of the day, dragging her mop around in weird shapes to keep herself amused; circles, diagonals, wiggly lines. Inside these shapes are strips of light, as though discarded by the string head at the end of her stick. Erica glances upwards at the real strip lights on the ceiling,

then at one of the mirrors on the wall behind every sink. Opposite the wall with the mirrors is the row of toilet cubicles, and Erica wishes that she could bring all the doors to such a shine that they would reflect like the wet floor reflects the ceiling lights, and then do the same with every wall until she would be stood in the middle of a room of mirrors. Then the room would seem to stretch to infinity, as though this little room could encapsulate the entire universe.

She catches herself before drifting too far into her imagination, puts her mop back in her cleaning trolley and pushes it out the door. On to the next job.

Is this the most pointless job in the world? Erica wonders. No sooner has she mopped so much as an inch of the floor of the train station's entrance lobby, than it is dirtied again by the step of someone's shoe. She could easily spend the entire day just cleaning the same square foot over and over again and it would still never stay clean for more than a few seconds. She looks out through the clear-glass doors that slide across to allow passengers to enter, looks at the single-decker buses pulling up and pulling out, spilling or soaking up people on the pavement. All those people, going somewhere while she is stuck with her mop and bucket. She wonders where they are headed. A woman in a sleek black trouser suit walks past her, mobile phone to ear.

"I don't care what he says, *he's* not making this deal..

Erica imagines her going to a high-powered business meeting, standing in front of a table surrounded by men, all of whom are intimidated by the authority this woman holds.

"Hey, Erica!"

She snaps back to reality, hoping that she hasn't been spotted day-dreaming by Rob again. But no, it's ok, it's Lucy.

"Hey there, Erica. You going tonight?"

"Going where?"

"You know, to see *her."*

'Oh, that. I'm not sure.' She glances away to avoid the probing eyes of her friend, and notices Gary standing by the entrance. Tall, dark and handsome; a cliche but a true one. Erica fancies him like mad in that security guard's uniform, and his almost military-short hair helps give the impression of strength. Lucy follows her gaze.

"Hey, snap out of it my girl. He might be nice to look at but he's more trouble than he's worth."

"What'd you know about it?" Erica snaps back, harsher than she means.

"I know he got that lass.. .what's her name, used to work at Tesco's? Mary,

that's it. I know he got that Mary pregnant, then left her alone with the bairn, an' he's being a real sod over the child-support. He's no good for no-one that lad."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Anyway, I don't think I can come."

"Come on, you've got to! You always miss her. Why not?"

"Mum wants me to baby-sit tonight."

"That kid sister of yours is sixteen now. She can be left for one night."

"Well...you don't know what she's like when she's left by herself."

"Then she can stay at a friend's house. Come on Erica, it's not like these appearances happen every night."

"Look, I can't promise, but I'll try.'

"That's my girl. Now, I've got to get back to the toilets by platform 11 before BO Boy notices I've gone. Call me after we clock off and I'll give you a lift to the gig. Ok?"

"Ok. See you later."

The clock reaches eleven and signals the beginning of her dinner break. Erica heads towards WH Smiths. Once inside, she heads towards the newspapers and magazines, ignoring the glossy women's life-style magazines, and the more austere broadsheet newspapers. Instead, she heads for the back corner to the Special Interest section, reaches out automatically (knowing each tide's place off by heart) and takes her selections to the till. Each bar code is scanned, Erica counts out exact change. She heads to the canteen with her purchases under her arm. This is her favourite part of her working day. Sitting down with a plate of chips (she did not have time to make any sandwiches this morning) and a cup of coffee, she spreads the magazines out on the table in front of her; *UFO, Paranormal Times, Conspiracy of Silence*. She takes a red felt-tip pen from her pocket and opens the first magazine, her eyes skimming each page as she flicks through them quickly. She holds the pen like a dagger, ready to thrust downwards at any moment, but she turns the last page without making a single mark on any of them. She tries not to be disappointed before moving on to *Par anorm alTimes*. No, no, no, maybe.. .no, no. Ah! A maybe- yes! The pen descends and circles like a vulture. *Filler Owl Attack! OAPs Menaced in Shopping Centre Sensation!* Yes, that's definitely a possibility. She glances at her watch. Her break is nearly over. She looks across the canteen and notices Gary sitting with a couple of other security guards, laughing, eating bacon and eggs. She wishes she could get him alone for a couple of minutes, maybe ask him out to the pictures or something. But not while he's with his mates.

Gary looks up and notices her gaze.

“You alright Erica?” he shouts over to her.

“Yeah.. .nothing.. .sorry,” she stutters, before picking up her magazines and hurrying out of the canteen. She has hardly touched her dinner.

Having walked up three flights of stairs (the lift, as usual, being out-of-order) she lets herself into her flat, picking the mail off the mat as she does so. She identifies them as bills without really looking. Pulling the curtains open allows the sun-light to continue its work of fading the print on the newspaper articles blutacked to the walls. In the corner of the room sits Erica’s little secret - her computer. She had to smuggle it into the flat in the middle of the night so that no-one saw it. If she had been seen the flat would have been turned over by now. She switches it on and enjoys the hum as it boots. She sits down in her arm-chair and slips her shoes off. The flat feels stuffy, like there’s been no new air allowed in for days. She opens her bag and takes the *Paranormal Times* out, flicking through it until she finds the story she circled in red before tearing it out. She stands up, wincing as she increases the pressure on her aching feet, and reaches up to her bookcase, taking down two tatty note-books and a ring binder. On the cover of one note-book she has written ‘Earth Chronology’, and ‘Iris Chronology’ on the other, both in the same red felt-tip she circled the article with. She opens the former, flicks to the first empty page, and writes down the details of the news report on it. Then, she opens the other (which has half the pages torn out) and does the same on the first page. She tears the pages out that she has written on, and opens the ring binder. Now, this is difficult. Which incarnation was it (if it was her at all)? There’s no details, no clues. No mention of a beautiful blonde seen fighting the beasts, or a pensioner in a Russian Doll of cardigans distracting them while some handsome young man sneaked up on them, on the sly. She is tempted to put it in the ‘blonde Iris’ section, because she is Erica’s favourite, and she likes the idea of her having more adventures than the others, but decides she can’t. After a moment she turns to the ‘Parallel/Alternative universe/Unknown Iris’ section, but then puts the book down goes over to the computer, unplugs the phone and inserts the computer’s modem into the socket before double-clicking on the web browser icon and checking her e-mail. Among the usual spam there was one from ‘rsc2004’ headed ‘Secret Info’. She opened it;

Dear Erica,

Thanks for the tip-off' about the model of IWs bus, it'll really help me narrow my search down. There's so many red double-deckers in London, I feel like every

one I don't get a good look at could be hers! Now I'll know which to ignore. You should come live down here, you don't get red buses up there, do you? Still, I suppose it means when you do see one it's almost certain to be her!

Now, keep this quiet, but there's an Unconvention happening down here in a month's time. Real fans only, we don't want loads of Casuals turning up. It would be so cool if you could come. You could stay with me! My place is pretty small, but it'd only be for a couple of nights. I'll let you know the date when it's confirmed.

Anyway, heard anything new? There's not been much news recently.

Let me know if you hear anything. TTFN,

Rachel.

Erica sighs. An Unconvention. She's always wanted to go to one, but they're always in London and it costs too much to get down there, even assuming she could get the time off. She doesn't reply to it now, she has got to check the newsgroups tonight and her internet time has to be rationed carefully to keep the bill down. She opens her newsgroups browser and clicks on 'rec.arts.iris'. There's a 36-message thread called Why the 4th Iris sucks', followed by a 28-message thread called Why the 4th Iris rules'.

She scans down the list, looking for references to the article she found in *Paranormal Times,* some confirmation, negation or just speculation. Which Iris is sexiest?', 'Which is your favourite Iris companion?', 'Who else thinks that Iris is too good for the Doctor?'. Finally, 'Paranormal Times article', posted by 'thel3thlris'. Erica opens it:

Saw an article in today's PT' that sounds like it might be about Iris (p25). Anyone confirm or deny ?

One reply from 'redbusfanatic';

I know the editor and he told me about this story ages ago. Unfortunately, I can't reveal what he said because any more details might breach the magafine's rule of anonymity for their sources.

Erica [6]*Oh's* in frustration. She hates people like that—claiming to have all kinds of exclusive inside information and then refusing to pass it on, just to put themselves above the rest of fandom. Knowledge is power. The more enigmatic you are, the more people pay attention to you in case you really do know

something. She closes her internet connection, re-connects her phone and dials Lucy's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi Lucy. It's Erica."

"Hi-ya. What time do you want me to pick you up tonight?"

"Sorry Lucy, but I can't come. I know I said I'd try, but my Mum says she'll never speak to me again if I don't baby-sit tonight."

"And that was supposed to be a threat to *stop* you going out? Well, I suppose if you can't come, you can't come. Shame though. Dunno when she'll be back round here again. It's not exactly a glamorous venue is it?"

"There'll be other nights. Anyway, I've got to go. Have a good time."

"I will love, don't you worry. See you at work tomorrow."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Erica puts the phone down and glances at her watch. Four o'clock. That gives her four hours to get ready. She likes to be able to take her time and enjoy the preparations whenever one of these nights comes along. Starting with a proper shower to wash away her personality with the dirt, allowing Erica to be slipped off like her uniform.

I'm a sensible, thirty…*something* woman, thinks Lucy. All glasses not totally full are in need of top-ups. Fit young men should be ogled but without any of those silly fantasies that they might notice you and fall head-over-heels. Ok, I pay my idiot tax on Saturdays even though I know my six numbers won't come up, but everyone does that. All in all, I'm level-headed as they come. So why, she wonders, do I feel like a school-girl on her first date? It's absurd.

She sits amid the kind of cacophony normally caused by the weekly Cub Scout meeting. Around her sits about one hundred and fifty people, including one or two familiar faces but mostly strangers, probably from out-of-town, here just for the night. From the animated way people are communicating—waving arms, raised voices, sub-conscious rocking motions—the rest of the crowd seems to share her level of anticipation.

There hasn't been a service in this church for a couple of years now, the pews have been sold, so tonight's congregation sits on uncomfortable blue plastic chairs. Where the altar once stood is now two chairs which, although plastic-backed, have cushions glued to the front, indicating the special significance of the people soon to be sat there.

It’s not like this is the first time she’s been to one of these events. But she’s hardly eaten today, worried she’d bring it back up. She can’t stop fidgeting, the wait is interminable. She is surrounded on all sides by all manner of people, from early twenties to late sixties. Indeed, such a combination is having a conversation next to her.

“Met her? Why, we’re like *that’”* explains a grey-haired grandmother with a face wrinkled like a tree-trunk, to a young man, twisting wrinkled fingers round each other. "I’m always at these events you know, and she notices these things. ‘Evie,’ she says, ‘my second shadow.’ That’s what she calls me—her second shadow.”

“I’d love to meet her,” says the young man, rather nervously, and his voice struggles to make it through the din. "But I don’t know what I’d say.” He is wearing a tight black top, with black trousers that would have looked reasonably smart had he not sown on pink flames the length of the outside legs, and replaced the seat of the pants with tartan. On his top is a four-letter word spelt in glitter.

"That’s what it’s always like when you meet someone you admire. Be bold, lad, be bold.”

"I wonder which one it’ll be.”

"Don’t know, love. Bet you’re hoping for the blonde one, eh?” Evie replies with a grin.

The young man smiles and does not answer.

Lucy is distracted by movement caught by the corner of her eye. A door at the back of the church has opened—the door to the vestry—and a figure emerges. All the conversations in the church stop. A man, maybe late twenties/early thirties, fairly tall and thin with short spiky hair, glasses and designer stubble. He is wearing blue denim jeans and a t-shirt (brave considering how cold it is) with a red, double-decker bus on it. He halts before the congregation, throws his arms out in a bad impression of a theatrical orator and announces;

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great privilege tonight to welcome that famous adventurer, wicked wit, fearless femme fatale, the deliciously decadent, beautifully bohemian, awesomely angelic lady who you have all been waiting for. The most stylish heroine in this or any universe, Ms Iris Wildthyme!”

The audience’s silence is snapped unanimously as the crowd stands and chants;

Iris! Iris! Iris!

Behind him, the vestry door opens again, and a woman, with long blonde hair,

slim build and wearing a blue cat-suit steps into the main body of the church.

The young man stands to one side and allows the woman to take centre stage. She blows theatrical kisses to the crowd and performs elaborate bows to much applause. The chanting continues, a joyous sound that echoes off stone walls built to withstand this kind of adoration and worship. Lucy finds herself screaming, and others break the orderly chant by whooping and personal pleas for the attention of the woman before them. Lucy has never been a church-goer, but remembers a midnight mass she had attended as a child at the request of her grandma that the whole family go. She remembers the hymns sung that night by people with their best suits and behaviour. And if you had taken all the joy in all the hymns sung that night and added it together it still wouldn't amount to this cry. She wishes Erica had been able to come. If ever there's a girl who needs a little joy in her life, it's her.

After a couple of minutes, the man indicates that the audience should sit and be quiet. After another couple of minutes, they do and are.

"Thank-you everyone, thank-you!" says Iris, when the second round of applause has dimmed enough for her to get a word in edge-ways. "It's a pleasure to be here tonight. I've always said that you're nothing without your fans, and it's wonderful to see so many of you here tonight."

"My name is Peter and I'm going to be conducting a basic question and answer session with Ms Wildthyme..

"Iris, dearie."

".. .with *Iris,* in which I'll be asking some questions as well as taking questions from the audience. Just a couple of things before we start. I'm sure I don't need to remind you all that Miss.. .that Iris is a guest, and should be treated as such. Also, remembering what happened last time we held one of these events, if anyone is here simply to berate Iris for not arriving to save the life of a loved one, you will be asked to leave. While we sympathise with your loss, Iris cannot be held responsible for the fall of every sparrow."

"Well said, pet."

"Finally, merchandise will be available at the end of tonight's event. You'll be able to buy t-shirts in assorted patterns and designs, including the one I'm wearing now. There will also be Iris key-rings, book-marks, belt-buckles, as well as fanzines and fan novelisations of Iris's adventures, based on the reports in the underground para-media. Now," he says, turning to his guest, "Iris, why not begin by telling us about your latest exciting adventure. Just how far have you travelled to be here tonight?"

"Oh, Peter, you mustn't think that I spend my left flying from one thrilling and dangerous escapade to the next! Nononono. Even space sirens such as myself need some time off, some 'r & r'."

"Oh, of course."

"I mean, I often go for long periods without toppling any evil empires, or fighting off marauding monsters or anything like that. Although, as it happens, I *have* just staged a daring escape from a dungeon but you don't want to hear about little things like that."

"Go on, tell us!" shouts a voice from the crowd.

"Oh, no," says Iris, "honestly there's no real story there. All I had to do was evade a squad of an alien emperor's most highly trained troops using only my wits and beauty. I mean, I freed all the slaves as well of course, but that was too simple to be worth telling. All it took was the re-wiring of the palace's central security computer inside the three minutes it takes for the anti-tamper bomb to go off, with only the metal wire from a bra, a lipstick and one of my high-heeled shoes. Anyone could have done it, really."

"It sounds fascinating Iris," says Peter eagerly. "Why not tell us from the beginning?"

"Well.. .ok. If you're sure. But you will stop me if you find it dull, won't you? I materialised the bus in the court of Emperor Illias the Magnificent. I stepped out of the doors and saw all around me the nobles of the planet Patrixes. They were in the middle of their holiest festival, and to interrupt it was punishable by death. So, there I was expecting to be gobbled up whole—the Patrixes are huge, crocodile-like creatures with razor-sharp teeth and stomach acid so dangerous their guts are lined with lead— and suddenly everybody starts applauding. Turns out the Emperor was a huge fan of mine, and the festival was actually in my honour!

"I had such a hard time getting away in the end. The poor creature was besotted with me. Absolutely refused to let me go. Said I had to marry him. Well, as you can imagine I wasn't having any of that nonsense and I told him straight. So, then he had me chained up in a filthy dungeon without any company except the guard who brought me my food. He wouldn't let them talk to me. The only time I was allowed out of the cell was to visit the little girl's room, and even then I had the guard stood outside the door. Can you *imagine,*? And I wasn't allowed to wash or sort my make- up out until I agreed to marry him."

"How did you escape, Iris?" shouts an impatient male voice from the crowd.

"Well, aren't we the premature one?" Iris replies. "Hasn't anyone ever told you

it’s better if you can wait a while before you splutter forth like that?”

The crowd laughs appreciatively, and Lucy feels an odd flutter of pride that her hero has such poise and wit.

"Since some of us can’t control ourselves,” she continues, "TH cut to the chase. Literally. Well, what happened was that the guard who brought me my food every day had made a bad career decision. Vero his name was. You see, he didn’t like to see people chained up, especially someone who was so obviously made to *exude* style. He was a sensitive boy. Anyway, eventually I convinced him to free me, and we ended up being chased through the palace catacombs by the Emperor’s personal guards. So, I thought that we should release all the slaves from their little cells to create a diversion. Vero kept watch while I re-wired the entire system to open all the cell doors it was keeping shut. Obviously, I stayed on until the slaves had taken over and established democracy, with Vero as their elected leader. I love a happy ending, don’t you?”

"Iris,” came another shout from the crowd, "where’s your bus?” There was a collective groan over the dusting off of that particular ‘classic’, and Lucy shakes her head sadly. Some Iris fans are real saddoes, she thinks. Give the rest of us a bad name.

"It’s just fine honey, blocking up a...” There was a pause and Lucy thought she saw a look of uncertainty on Iris’ face, before she continued "temporal leak thingy. But it’s ok because it’s using the energy to top up on fuel. Now then loves, any questions for me that are actually worth asking? Don’t be shy now.”

There is about two seconds of silence. Then everyone tries to ask their questions at once.

A couple of hours later, and the side-door to the church opens, and out steps a lone figure. Some of the noise from inside, as the Iris fans talk, compare clothes and queue up for commemorative key-rings, flows out with her until she staunches the flow by closing the door. The contrast between the church packed with human warmth and the bitter outside world makes her shiver uncontrollably, despite her winter coat, until her body gets used to the temperature. At this hour it is so cold that the air seems to have frozen, and breathing is like swallowing sharp ice. Her breath acting like a personal smoke-screen, she sets off towards the gate, hands in pockets, fingers wrapped around £10 notes.

The door to the church opens behind her as someone else leaves. She increases her speed.

"Iris! Wait!”

The voice is soft, male, rushed.

She turns back to face him. He is shaking so much that the pink flames on his trousers appear to be burning. It is dark in the church-yard (much to her relief), but he looks quite nice in a plain kind of way.

"I saw you sneaking out. I used to come to this church you see, when I was a kid. So, I knew there wasn’t another way out and you’d have to come back through the church. So, I kept an eye out for you. Not that I’m a God-botherer or anything. I don’t blame you for sneaking out — they’d never have let you go otherwise.” He speaks as though trying to cram every second that it’s his turn to talk with as much information as he can.

"What is it you want, darling?” she asks.

"Well, it’s just that I’m a huge fan of yours - and you were great tonight, by the way - and, I just wanted to tell you. I had a bit of trouble a couple of years ago, you don’t want to hear about it, but I was a bit down, you know. Things weren’t working out, I was a bit lonely.. .anyway, like I said, you don’t want to hear about that. But then I heard about you, you see. About this woman who travelled around the universe, having all kinds of wild adventures and whose life was full of excitement and colour. And it really helped, you know? I started reading the novelisations of your adventures, and following the fanzines, and looking for reports of you in the alternative news-sheets. And it pulled me through, it really did, just knowing there was someone out there, someone like you. And everyone else feels the same. I know they do. Like tonight, I never felt an atmosphere like that when it was still being used as a church, never. So, I just kinda wanted to say...thank-you.” He pauses, and looks embarrassment at the ground. “You wouldn’t have thought I’d rehearsed that, would you?”

She looks at him, this shy young man with his real-life problems and his belief in her. “You did just fine,” she says, not sounding quite like she did in the church earlier. “Anyway, I’ve got to get back to the bus. Good-night honey, hope to see you next time I make a stop.” She walks away, dematerialising into the night.

Erica day-dreams her way through work, barely even wishing the boss would discover deodorant. She dreams of being Iris, with Gary as her companion and lover, travelling the galaxies in the bus. She isn’t unblocking a loo - she is defusing a bomb. She isn’t mopping the floor, she is wrestling with an alien that can control any object made o£ wood. She time travels the only way she can -

forwards, one second at a time — towards clocking off time, and barely notices when she arrives.

She does not have a booking tonight—the next one is an out-of- town gig in a couple of days—so she has to fill her evening. She smiles to herself; she knows what she will do. Under her pillow is a book of writing paper. Some of the pages are covered in Erica's scratchy hand-writing. It had started just as a place for her to note down some stories she could tell on stage. Nothing flashy. She found that when she was on-stage she could improvise. It was weird, like she really wasn't herself from the moment she stepped in front of the audience. She always wonders about the audiences. Surely, some part of them knows that she can't possibly be the real Iris, but then, sometimes when she's in full-flow on stage, *she* almost believes that she is. Perhaps it's just easier to believe a lie sometimes, if it makes life feel better. If it's useful.

"I don't know how you can live in that Hole-in-the-skirting- Board," her Mum would say, normally as Erica was about to leave her house. "You're quiet as a mouse, but you don't have to live like one."

But, in the costume with the lights on her, she feels so different. She prefers being Iris to being Erica. Erica never has adventures. And one day, she had realised that what she was doing on stage was making up stories, like writers do. And then she started writing more of them, longer, more complicated to the point where she would never be able to remember it all. And then she realised what she was doing and her secret was born; she was writing an Iris Wildthyme novel. A big, colourful book where the bus travelled around magical worlds, and whatever she wanted could come true, where any strange character she thought of could come along for the ride. She doesn't do much reading, but she has a library card and once tried to read a book every month. But they were all so dull. She doesn't want to read about the ordinary world. She lives in that all the time; why would she want to read about it as well? No, she wants adventures. She wants thrills. She wants handsome heroes with brooding faces and long hair. She wants monsters; proper monsters who want to take over worlds. She wants magic. And slowly, she realised that she was writing the book she always wanted to find in the library, but never did.

She starts a new chapter. She has been thinking about it for ages. There is a vicious ruler who wants Iris dead, because Iris always beat tyrants, and there was...Z?zz^ of course. Erica often wonders about him. She can't understand how he can turn Iris down like he always does (or so the rumours say). She's wild,

vibrant, exciting. They could join forces, be a team. But he doesn't work like that. He prefers to surround himself (mostly) with ordinary people. Just people he picks off the streets. He could travel with anyone, anyone in the whole universe. Yet he nearly always picks humans, from roughly the same time period just because they happen to get involved in his latest adventure and are eager for more. But that's so silly! If he wants company, he could offer the chance to princesses, or exotic aliens with super- powers. What if she were to bump into him on the street one day, would he offer her the chance to travel around with him? *Her?*

Surely not, the idea is too ridiculous.

But that is the great thing about her story. Erica could make *anything* happen. So, she is going to write a happy ending. He will be trapped in a dungeon, and Iris (blonde Iris, the seriouslyy?/Iris) will rescue him and he will realise that they belong together, and he'll give up his silly little blue box and whoever he is travelling with and he'll start a new life with Iris, and Erica will write adventures for them. She picks up her pen, turns to the first blank page, and starts to write.

It's Friday. She gets the weekend off—some poor lass struggling for money to pay for her degree comes in instead. It's an odd day—everyone knows how close they are to their days off, but they still have eight hours to scrub through before they reach them. But freedom is alluring, and no-one manages to keep their minds on their jobs. There are nights out to organise, people need to be reminded that they've got to get the first round in. Erica let her mind wander and imagines the real Iris walking on stage in the middle of a show. In this, one of her very favourite fantasies, Iris puts her arm round her and pretends that Erica is another of her incarnations as opposed to an impersonator. They swap anecdotes before the audience, both adlibbing furiously but faultlessly, ending with a song, a duet of [4]The Winner Takes It AH', which brings the house down.

"In a good mood, are we?" asks Lucy from behind her as she mops. Suddenly she realises that she must have been singing her part of the duet out loud. Erica and Lucy hadn't been able to talk yesterday, so Lucy starts to fiH Erica in on what she thinks she missed at the [4]event'.

[44]It was wonderful! All those people together, and then *she* walked in. I screamed! *Me!* And to think, whenever there's some boy band on the news surrounded by screaming girls I look down on [4]em!"

Erica tries not to look too pleased as Lucy proceeds to unwittingly compliment her performance. [44]Oh, she was gorgeous as ever. The blonde in the cat-suit, you

know. So glamorous. You should have been there. ReaHy. Next time, tell your Mum where to stuff her baby-sitting. You can't be ruled by her all your life. Take a leaf out of Iris' book and stand up to her."

Erica glances over Lucy's shoulder and sees Gary joking with a couple of the other security guards. He glances up, and their eyes meet for a moment. He smiles, and she looks away quickly. *Oh my God* she thinks, *he's coming over!*

Lucy looks round and spots Gary on his way.

"Don't worry," she says, "I'll not play gooseberry." She picks up her mop and bucket and walks away.

Gary walks across to her accompanied by his mates. She smiles shyly.

"You look happy," Gary says.

"Er...yes.. .I'm o-ok," she stammers.

"Good," says Gary. "Listen, Erica, I've been thinking. Do you like going to the pictures?"

"Yeah, yeah I do," she replies eagerly.

"Do you wanna see the new Bond film?"

He surely isn't asking.. .is he? "I'd love to," she answers.

"Cool," Gary says, "cos Roy wants to go and he hasn't got a date!" His mates, who have been waiting for the punch line, almost choke on their laughter. Roy joins in, the lights reflecting off his bald head, his second chin wobbling in amusement.

"Go on Erica," spits Gary through the laughter, "it's his birthday. It's not every day you're 57."

Erica's cheeks stain bright red, and she runs into the ladies' changing rooms, goes into a toilet cubicle and locks the door, before sitting on the closed loo-top and only then does she allow herself to cry. How could she have fallen for it, hoped he was being serious? How stupid could someone be? And how is it that she can hold an audience several times the size of that group entranced any night of the week, but she stumbles over her words so much in front of a few lads?

She kicks her bag across the floor in frustration, and finds it heavier than her foot expected. Then she remembers; her Iris costume is in there, so she can take it to the dry-cleaners straight after work, to have it ready for tonight's show. Perhaps.. .perhaps if she put it on, she could find some of that.. .*presence* she was missing now, and she could face down the lads as Iris. She thinks about it for a moment, before giving up on the idea. If they knew about her.. .hobby she'd never hear the last of it. But she doesn't wear the costume while she writes her novel, and she has written Iris dialogue in it. So, leave the clothes. She dries

her eyes with a tissue, and re-does her make-up in the mirror next to the sinks. Standing up as straight as she can, she walks back out of the changing room. She'll show them. She'll be sharp and witty. She'll make everyone laugh at *them* for once. She'll...

They have gone, all she can see are un-red buses and unglamorous passengers. Her resolve vanishes. She won't see them again until first break, and the canteen always seems to suck the volume from her words. Plus, she will have to face them down in front of everybody—what if it went wrong? She'd never live it down—it would be every day. She knows that her moment has passed, she will not have the guts to stand up to them again.

But that's ok, that's fine. Because she has the show tonight (and other nights), she has her novel and her fantasies. She will cope. She has Iris.

'He needs to get his motivation back, Iris, and to learn how to motivate other people. Otherwise we might as well have stayed at home.

'So, we'll read your diaries and learn how to do what you do. He'll remember the fire that used to burn inside him, and he'll learn how to communicate that fire to the people he meets. I hope you understand and can forgive me.

'Goodbye Iris.'

The recording stopped and Susie disappeared. Her after image stayed in front of my eyes for a few moments, then it too faded and I found myself sitting alone in the dark bus.

Maybe it was time to take a holiday.

Iris Wildthyme and the Spiders from Magrs

Alan Taylor

Time takes a cigarette, puts it in your mouth.

The newsreader was crying. Cried so much his face was wet. That's how I knew he wasn't real.

And now - now that the end of the world was finally nigh, felt I had time for one last hit. With the sweet smoke burning slightly at the back of my throat, I had never felt so alone.

Planet Earth was doomed, and there was nothing I could do.

At the time, I was travelling with Joe, a beautiful lad with deep green eyes and a slim, almost hairless body that he kept trapped in tight green knitwear and corduroy trousers with huge flares and turn-ups that I used to keep my sandwiches in.

Very Important when you're out on the field, that is. You can never have enough sandwiches. Or chocolate coated Bath Olivers.

As I say, I was travelling with Joe, which makes it almost certainly a Tuesday. I would imagine that we made an unusual looking couple. Fortunately, I have an uncanny ability to blend in to the background wherever I go. Joe tended to stand out, but such is the fate of those who are beautiful but lack my beautiful bone structure.

HE was dead approachable, like. HE told me that he would show me the world, and that the others meant nothing to him. Then he said that we should try to cram as much as possible in to the rest of our lives, because we only had five years left. That's beautiful, I said, crawling over to kneel at Iris' feet and let her pass me a fresh joint.

"Yes, dear," said Iris. "Out of this world," she said. I tried to make eye contact with her friend Joe but he was further out of it than I was.

I wanted to be Iris, despite the fact that I was small and dumpy and she was tall and slim and had fantastic hair and a beautiful bone structure. I told her I

wanted to be her and she laughed gently and said I should wait until I was her age before I said that. Whatever.

I had to improvise, since I didn't have any blue crystals left over from my last short trip and side step to Metebilis Three, so I souped up some dope plus, to open the neural pathways and enable us to make contact with them. Fiendish buggers these spiders, and with the TARDIS out of action thanks to an unfortunate clamping, I couldn't pop over to Mars for tea and talking them out of invading. As you do.

Angle had taken too much as she usually did - and she was talking in tongues, to the thin guy she called HIM. I could see the traceries of a crystal spider beginning to creep into our plane, sprawled across her back. I gave Joe a squeeze on the shoulder, and metabolised myself back to a compus mentis state.

Iris had stood up, like, and was staring at me while I kept whispering my love to HIM. She'd pulled something pink from a holster on her belt, but all could do was look at her tits and wonder how she managed to stop them from falling out.

"Yeah, man," I said. "Free love. You're great Iris," I said, "great." She told HIM to hold me and I willingly let HIM tie my arms behind me, as Iris waved the pink thing in my face. I couldn't focus on It, but it looked about six inches long. Couldn't hurt.

"Joe!" she said, and he brought over a metal eyepiece that clamped over her head. A bright red light shot out where it covered her eye. Round about then, the panic hit me and I started flailing my legs, trying to get out of HIS grasp.

"Hold her still," she said. "I don't want to shoot her by mistake."

The first time I heard about the Spiders from Mars I was on my knees, and not in prayer. The man who knew only as Eddie tried to keep a straight face as he listened to his effete aide squealing excitedly about the spiders.

Eddie dismissed the man as quickly as he could, hoping that the purple flushing in his neck, and the gasp would be taken for astonishment.

Me, I just climbed out from under the desk, and dabbed gently at the side of my mouth with a lace hanky. Eddie adjusted his clothing. 'That was fantastic Iris" he said.

"I'd love to stay around and give you some advice other than look out for Maggie," said I, dropping a little nugget of information in to the conversation. "But it sounds like your country needs me."

Then he pointed out that I had missed a bit, so I got my hanky out again.

He called me earlier - said he had to call someone and he'd picked on me. "Turn

on the television," he said. "Iris Is in town."

The thing was, I'd heard It somewhere too, and we turned on the television just to be sure. As the set warmed up and the little grey picture flickered in to life, there she was, wandering through the Open University Foundation course on Quadratics, as though she owned the place, a flash of fruit salad colour.

We met up with Iris in Walthamstow church hall, the only people over four feet tall at the under eight's disco and boogie night. She was as stunning as ever.

"What's up, dollface," he asked.

"I'm still gorgeous, I'm still out of your league and you still can't afford me," said Iris. I waved at Joe, who seemed to be staring at HIM.

"Come on," said Iris, "let's go somewhere quiet for smoke."

We walked into the night, Iris in front, HIM behind, with me on one arm and Joe on the other.

I'd met Joe at the UNIT Christmas party, where he had been trying to chat up Mike Yates. I soon persuaded him of the futility of that one, let me tell you that one. He Is, as I say, beautiful. These days, I hardly see him, but when I think of him, it is always In one of two positions. Firstly, he is atop a high mountain, looking over the sea. Then the perspective changes, and he is on rooftops, and the sea becomes a myriad of other rooftops, a town, perhaps a city.

The other way I remember him involves looking down and seeing the top of his head only. I get a warm fuzzy feeling whenever think about what that boy could do with his tongue.

In those days we all wanted to be like Iris. Six feet tall, full bodied blonde hair with a figure to die for, a tight nylon catsuit, open to the navel that was only saved from being indecent by how well she filled it.

In this world, though, there's only room for one Iris.

It's funny the things that go through your mind at times like these. All I could think about was Irls' hair, when really I should have been more concerned about being possessed by alien interdimensional spiders.

Groovy.

I took Joe to Olleril once, and we did the drag thing. I overdid the eye shadow, which always makes the boys think I'm one of them. Joe did the Kiss meets Darth Maul look, with lots of dark hair, tight blue jeans and a symmetrical pattern on his face. It may have been a tragedy night, but he was in his element. People stared at the make up on his face, but frankly he was the most graceful thing in the place.

Some eight legged geezer sauntered up to me and asked me If I knew his name. "His name," I said, "is Legion, for he is many".

"Bugger" said Ernie, "I'm looking for the Doctor."

"Oh," said I, "aren't we all dear.".

I couldn't do much except look out through my eyes that weren't really mine any more. My vision was confused and baffled, multiple Images swimming before my eyes, like Insects.

Iris and HIM had been hanging out at Mick's place the first time I met them. I thought that they were sisters, at first, or brothers. I couldn't tell which of them had modelled themselves on the other.

Later, I met Iris again - over at Andy's. There, she was dressed as an albino spaceman, with a short blond bob of a haircut. It was scary.

I remember once, I met her just as she was getting on to a number 22 bus. She was wearing a silly hat, and had plucked eyebrows, pale skin and long dark strands of hair with ribbon in them. Her clothes were a multi-layered cacophony, and for a second didn't recognise her.

'Iris?" I asked. Then, when she had smiled that unmistakable smile I continued. "Where are you going?"

"Why, Angie love," she said. "I'm just off to 1983 for a couple of hours. I'll be back to see Eddie later."

"Dressed like that? They'll laugh."

She smiled. "I can fit In anywhere, love. After all, am a karmic chameleon. Oh, I should be back by six. Tell him that I want to spend the night together."

The spider was winding Itself into my mind. Maybe I just made that up.

We needed to talk to the spider, and the fact that it was only linked to us by the flimsiest of links didn't help. Given that they don't actually have spiders on Mars, had surmised from the death threats that we were talking interdimensional aliens here. Fortunately, I have a lovely gun.

Okay, eight-legs, I said, using the terminology I had picked up from Ernie, back on Olleril. Talk, or I blow you in to lots of little bits. When she spoke, she spoke through Angie because frankly, the idea of a spider talking was just too ridiculous.

Tongue twisting. Praying.

Can't talk much. Just ball and play, mainly.

You are blessed.

We are bitter.

Made no sense to me. The thing scuttled off Angie's back, then, and I wasn't fast enough pushing the knob to blast It. I shouted at one of the blokes to Hang on to her, as I raced after the thing, surprisingly fleet In my platforms.

The question struck me as I regained consciousness.

Iris was racing round the room like a tiger on butter, and there was no sign of the dope left in my mind, or the spider on my back.

So... where were the spiders?

HE was making out, like, with Joe In a corner, and Iris seemed to be running In circles. It was up to me.

“Typical,” gasped Iris. “Leave It to the women again.”

Joe grunted.

Then I saw It scuttling towards me so I slipped off my shoe and battered it soundly.

“Wham, Bam, thank you Ma'am,”, said Iris, nodding appreciatively.

“You're welcome,” said I. Then as it lay there shivering a bit, Iris shot it.

“So, Joe,” I said as we got on the bus to go home. “You were a fat lot of use there.” I could see his nipples pushing against his tight tee shirt. “Mind you,” I continued, “that's not what I keep you around for, is it?”
He smiled his beautiful smile and kissed me on the forehead. He was a liability, that's for sure.

“Gimme your hands,” he said to me, and then he called me Angie which made a change from doll-face. ”Mick and the boys have got some good gear down at Keith’s place.”

“I felt SO strange, I said, “when the spider was talking through me. Like I was there and there was no way for me to talk to anyone. So I felt, like, alone at the same time. Helpless.”

“Gimme your hands, he said to me again, and kissed me on the forehead. “You're not alone. You,” he sald, “are wonderful.”

And not alone.

A World Apart

Daniel Tesler

“Now what?” moaned Rose, brushing her hair as she strolled into the console room. Her mouth stretching wide as she failed utterly to stifle a yawn.

“Sorry if I’m keeping you up,” said the Doctor, glancing over his shoulder as he adjusted numerous controls on the amber- coloured console.

“Well, yes, you are, actually,” she replied, following the Time Lord around the room as he bounded to the opposite bank of controls. "I was in bed. It’s the middle of the night. Why’d you wake me up?”

"One, the TARDIS exists outside of time, so technically there is no night. So, if I say it’s time to get up, the kettle should be on in five minutes or under. And two, I’m trying to track a very faint but very important signal, and I need you to hold down that button there.” The Doctor planted his forefinger on what appeared to be a champagne cork screwed into the glowing turquoise innards of the console.

"Fine,” said Rose, holding the button down. “So, what kind of signal is it? And where’s Jack?”

“Right behind you,” said the cheerful brogue of Captain Harkness. Rose turned to see him standing behind her, grinning and holding a tube of tightly coiled wires.

“Rose, finger on that button!” shouted the Doctor.

“Will this do, Doctor?” asked Jack, holding the contraption up.

“Should do,” he said, fiddling with more gizmos. “Just plug it in down by my foot here.”

“What’s that?” asked Rose. “And again, what kind of signal is it?”

“It’s a power booster,” said Jack, straightening back up.

“It’s Time Lord,” said the Doctor.

“What?” gasped Rose.

“Finger on the button!”

“Sorry! But how can it be Time Lord? I thought you were definitely the last one?”

“So did I. Looks like I was wrong. We’ve picked up the signal of another

TARDIS. It's fully functional and primed, so it must be occupied." The Doctor flashed her a broad, toothy grin. "Wasn't that worth getting up for?"

"Guess so," smiled Rose.

"Good. Now Jack, you seem wide awake."

"Beds aren't for sleeping in, Doc."

"Whatever. Stick the kettle on, would you? Two sugars, ta."

Finally, after much fiddling, adjusting, rocking about and two rounds of tea, the TARDIS materialised on the cracked and weathered surface of a planet. The doors opened, the Doctor hurrying out, followed by his two companions.

"Where are we?" asked Jack, slipping into his shiny leather coat.

"No idea," said the Doctor, straightening his considerably more battered leather coat. "Somewhere in the Acteon Group. Not that that helps much." He sniffed the air. "Bit ozoney, isn't it? Perfectly breathable, though. Bit nippy."

'"You're telling me," said Rose, zipping up her fleece. "So where's this TARDIS?"

"Just over that hill, I think. Didn't want to materialise right next to it, just in case, y'know."

"In case of what? It's one of your people, right? What's there to worry about?"

"D'you trust every human on your planet?"

"Fair enough," she said.

"I've had problems with most Time Lords at some point. Bit of a troublemaker, me." He grinned. "But there's always worse troublemakers."

"Understood," said Jack. "It could be the Time Lord equivalent of Magnus Greel over that hill."

"Who?" said Rose.

"After your time," said the Doctor. "Come on."

They trekked across the rocky plain, ascending the hill quickly, kicking up a cloud of dust. The Doctor reached the summit first, and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Oh no," he said. "I don't believe it. I really don't believe it."

"What is it? What's wrong?" cried Rose, hurrying up behind him.

"Is that a bus?" asked Jack. "That is a bus, right?"

"The Number 22," sighed the Doctor, "for Putney Common."

"Is that a TARDIS?" asked Rose, faintly incredulous.

"Yep. That's a TARDIS all right." He started to make his way down the hill. As the trio approached, a head popped out of one of the windows. A head topped with long, golden waves of hair, and wearing far too much make-up.

“Coo-ey!” she said. “Come on over, I won’t bite!”

“Doctor,” said Rose, “does everyone from your planet sound like they’re northern?”

“No, not everyone. Just a couple of us.” By now they were almost upon the bus. The mysterious traveller had now exited the vehicle. She was clad in a black PVC catsuit, and high heels.

“Hello, Iris,” said the Doctor. “It’s me.”

“Well, bugger me!” said the woman.

“Gladly,” smirked Jack, receiving a punch to the arm from Rose.

“Doctor! It’s you, isn’t it? Blimey, don’t you look rugged? Love the leather look. Suits you. Ooh, I just knew you’d turn up! Our destinies are as entwined as ever.”

“Iris, how did you get here?” said the Doctor, his gob clearly smacked.

“I took the bus, luwy. Same as usual. You still in that old police box?”

“I mean... how are you here at all? It’s impossible!”

“Oh, nothing’s impossible luvvy. I’ll explain it all later. So, who are your friends?”

“Hi,” said Jack, grasping Iris’s hand, and planting a suave kiss upon it. “Captain Jack Harkness.”

“Iris Wildthyme,” said Iris, beaming.

“Nice to meet you, Iris,” said Jack, beaming back.

“I’m Rose,” said Rose, eager to interrupt any unnecessary flirting.

“She the latest one, then?” asked Iris.

“Latest one?” mouthed Rose, turning to the Doctor.

“I picked up Rose on Earth in 2005,” said the Doctor. “Best travelling companion I’ve ever had,” he added, smiling at Rose.

“Oh,” said Iris, looking a little crestfallen. “Does that include me?”

“Jack joined us in 1944,” subject-changed the Doctor, “but he’s originally from the 51st Century. Funny story—he nearly destroyed humanity. Still, you only live once, don’t you?”

“Not us, Doctor. Not us.”

“This is Iris. We go back a long way.”

“He was only a touch over three hundred when I met him.

What a young rogue he was!”

“Six hundred years?” said Rose. “That is a long friendship.”

“What?” said Iris. “He told you he was only nine hundred? Love, he passed a thousand a long time ago. Cheeky monkey. Anyway, you lot must come into the

bus! G and T's all round!"

"Doctor?" said Rose in a suspicious tone of voice.

"Come on, she's harmless." Jack was in the bus before he'd even finished the sentence.

"Yeah, but who is she?" Rose whispered.

"Just an old friend. We go back a long way."

They followed her into the bus.

Quietly, unnoticed by the four travellers, something was moving. It existed between what the Doctor would have called "striations of the continuum." It lay between the borders of universes, pushing blindly against the dimensional fields that restrained it. Extending feelers, it probed the darkness, grasping futilely in the nothingness in which it existed. Lived wasn't really the appropriate word—it couldn't truly be said to be alive in any real sense. It was a function, a mathematical anomaly quivering in a theoretical absurdity. There was no way it could ever break into true existence. It would always be confined outside of everything, a mere possibility. Until its alien, geometric senses happened upon a discontinuity, and it began to seep through...

Rose clambered in after Iris, subconsciously manoeuvring to block the Doctor's view of her plastic-clad buttocks. She stumbled over the steps, her mouth dropping open as she took in the interior of the magnificent transcendent time machine.

"So it's just a bus?" she said.

"Just a bus?" spluttered Iris. "TH have you know this is a fully functioning Time And Relative Dimension In Space craft. Type—oh, I forget. But it's one of the better ones."

"But it's the same size on the inside!"

"Oh yes. It's the latest thing you know. Dimensional transcendence is so passé."

"But it looks just like a bus! Where's the console? The roundels? That bit that goes up and down when it takes off?"

"The control console is ingeniously disguised as the dashboard and gears of your standard London double-decker. The time rotor is integrated into the rear engine of the craft. And there's a roundel over there." She waved vaguely left.

"That's a washing machine."

"It's round."

"Hey," said the Doctor, suddenly bounding across the length of the bus to

where Iris was perched on an old fashioned wooden seat, “Is this mine?” He laid his hands on a white hat stand, which was stood in the corner, numerous floppy hats and feather boas draped over it.

“You gave it to me, Doctor,” said Iris. “Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, you know what my memory’s like Iris,” he said, still looking amazed. “I thought I’d lost this. I was looking for it for ages. Now I can have a matching pair!”

“Who said I was going to give it back?”

“Iris, it’s—no, hang about, no problem. You keep it. You’re right. It’s yours now.”

*You’ve lost the other one, haven’t you Doc?” said Jack, who was happily reclining in a battered armchair next to the drinks cabinet.

“I left it on Frontios,” he said, looking a little shamefaced.

“Ooh, Doctor,” said Iris,“you want to be careful. That’s right at the end of the noosphere. You’ll get in trouble if you go messing about at that end of time.”

The Doctor looked Iris directly in the eyes, gripping her gently by the shoulders. “Iris,” he said firmly, “there is no noosphere. There’s no limit to Time Lord observation, because there’re no Time Lords left. They all died. How did you survive the War?”

"What war?”

"What war?” said the Doctor, confusion across his face. "The Time War, Iris. The damn war we were fighting for centuries. The war against the Daleks. The war in which you fought. I was there by your side. I thought you’d died with the rest of them.”

"Oh, Doctor, I’m so sorry. There’s something I’d better tell you.”

"What? What the hell is going on here?”

"I’m not, well, you see—” Iris paused, and started again. "I’m not your Iris. I’m from another time stream. A parallel universe. You know the type of thing. History goes in one direction there, another here.”

"But that’s a theoretical absurdity,” interjected Jack. "You can’t cross timelines. You can overwrite histories, but not jump between them.”

"Oh, can’t you? You listen to me. I’m a Time Lady. This old bus can do more than just go backwards and forwards. It can go sideways too. I try not to cross timelines too often. This is just the sort of thing that’s bound to happen.”

"You and this knackered old TARDIS,” complained the Doctor. "It’s never been stable. So, why’d you come to this reality? What’s so terrible about yours?”

“I’d really rather not say,” said Iris, looking sheepish. “Not in the company of

those I've only just met."

"Oh, all right. You two, outside please."

"Why do we have to go out in the cold?" complained Rose.

"Because I asked you to. Nicely. We'll only be a mo. Two mos at most. All right?"

"OK," sighed Rose, as she and Jack slinked off outside.

The two humans were playing with the rocks. Jack was crouched, picking up pebbles and tossing them across the ground, as if throwing stones across the sea. Rose was pacing around, hands in pockets, kicking the rocks by her feet as far as they'd go.

"Relax, Rose," said the Captain. "I'm sure they just need to sort out a bit of history."

"Oh, so they've got history, you think?"

"Well, that's pretty obvious. What's wrong with you? You're acting just a little—"

"Don't even say it."

"—jealous."

"I'm not the one who was staring at her tits."

"I wasn't staring at them. I was staring at the Doctor's bottom. Iris's chest just happened to be in my line of sight."

"You just don't think of him as having ex-girlfriends though.

I know he must have done, you know, at some point, but all he ever does these days is save planets. We're never on a planet more than half a day before he's got to save it. How's he got time for anything else?"

"Best way to meet girls. Trust me."

"Yeah, cos all girls are impressed by blokes who swan in, saving the day in their time machines."

"Well, you went with him after he saved your world," said Jack, smiling.

"That's different, that's—look, not everything's about sex, you know. Or is it different in your time?"

"Do you know how many planets called Angvia there are in the 51st century?"

"Don't be a cnut, Jack."

"What's that?"

"Now what?" snapped Rose.

"That," said Jack, pointing across the plain. The ground was swelling. Ripples undulated across it, rocks flying off in all directions.

“It’s like some kind of wave,” said Rose.

“Rose? It’s coming this way.”

"This is your ninth incarnation, right Doctor?”said Iris, pouring herself and the Doctor large scotches.

“That’s right,” said the Doctor, taking his glass and settling down in the now vacated armchair. “Although sometimes I wonder if I’ve lost count.”

“Well, back in my reality, your ninth incarnation looks a bit different. You know, regeneration doesn’t always behave predictably. Your eighth regeneration could have led to all sorts. In this case, you—well, you were a bit more traditional, if you know what I mean? Stuck with the frock-coated look, the waistcoat and the long hair. Still had a big nose, though.”

“Enough of that.”

“Sorry. You know I’ve always loved your noses. Anyway, this version of you was a bit of a romantic. Met this girl, took a shine to her. Emma, I think she was called. By the time I met her, the two of you were engaged. You were going to retire on Earth. Have the honeymoon on Betelgeuse Two, I think, but back to England after that. We said goodbye, you—the other you, I mean—went off to tell that idiot Koschei, and I went on my way.”

“Iris, is this going anywhere?”

“Well, I took it a bit badly. I always thought we’d end up together again, eventually. So, I fiddled with the bus, jumped across the timelines and came here. Set the old fella to find a reality where you timeline diverged before you met her. I knew we’d find each other, we always do. So, there it is.”

The Doctor leaned forward. His face had lost its edge, and he was smiling now.

"Oh, Iris. You never did get over me, did you?”

"You always told me you weren’t the settling down type,” she said, tears welling in her eyes. “But you bloody well were, weren’t you?”

"Well, that me was, but this me isn’t. Well, I don’t think so. I’ve not been in this body long. But I’ve always cared about you. We’ve had some good times, in the past, haven’t we?”

He took her hands in his, and she replied, ‘Wes, we have, haven’t we? Remember that time on Venus? Behind the volcanoes? We nearly didn’t get dressed quickly enough to make it to safety.”

“I seem to remember that you started that one off.”

“But it was definitely you who lured me there in the first place. “Oh, Iris, look

over here at these fascinating rocks! Ooh, it's a bit warm, isn't it? Hmm?"

"I wish you'd kept your old hair."

"I wish you'd kept your old o"

But then he kissed her.

"Doctor!" said Rose, bursting in. "There's something outside and what going on in here?"

"Sorry to interrupt," smirked Jack. "But there's trouble outside."

The Doctor stepped outside, avoiding Rose's glances at him.

"There," said Jack, pointing across the horizon, "Some kind of distortion wave. It's heading straight for us, and growing."

"What is it?" said Iris.

"I'm not sure," said the Doctor. "Something in the planet's make-up, perhaps? Or a dimensional anomaly?"

The wave was very close now, but slowing. It slowed to a stop, but began to bulge upwards, the rock distorting further, becoming fluid, stretching into a serpentine form. The end split, snapping wildly like the mouth of a fish out of water.

In the distance, more wormlike protrusions could be seen to be rising from the ground.

"In the bus," said the Doctor. "Now."

"Iris, how does the scanner on this ship actually work?" cried the Doctor, jabbing the dashboard in vain. "If it actually works, that is?"

The Time Lady joined his side. "Here, let me," she said, and fiddled with a couple of buttons. The windscreen lit up, no longer showing the external environment in the visible spectrum, but as a wide array of readings of differing radiations and energies.

"Look, there, you see?" The Doctor turned to Iris. "It is a dimensional distortion. But the level of complexity, the self- regulation—it's alive. Or at least, it's close."

"And it's spreading. It's going right through the heart of the planet." She looked back at the Doctor. "We've got to get off of this planet. The whole thing could be alive and churning up in the next few hours."

"And we're hardly likely to survive that long. You three stay in here. Iris, get your ship off the planet. I'm going back for mine."

"Doctor, you can't," said Iris.

""Course I can."

And he was gone. Before they could stop her, so was Rose.

Iris began to dematerialise the bus. The familiar grinding sound ensued, and the world outside faded into the swirling patterns of the space/time vortex.

"What're you doing?" cried Jack. "Rose is out there, she'll—"

"She's with the Doctor. She'll be all right. If we go out for her now, we'll all probably get killed. The whole bloody area's ripping apart."

"Doctor!"

"Rose! What the hell are you doing out here? I told you to stay with Iris!"

"I just didn't want to be left without you. Just in case you didn't make it."

"You'd rather... No time for discussion now, we've got to get going."

He grabbed her by the hand, and hoisted her up the hill. The rocks churned beneath their feet, rippling and sucking at them. The Doctor pushed Rose up to the summit, from which she tumbled, head over heels, to the ground below.

"Rose!"

The Doctor leapt down to her, narrowly dodging a rock tentacle that ripped through the ground towards him. He grabbed her by the shoulders, dragging her to her feet.

"Rose, come on, we've got to get back to the TARDIS."

Painfully, she walked with him.

"Nearly there. Come on."

He unlocked the ship's door, bundling Rose through and entering himself. Sprinting up to the console, he set the dematerialisation codes, and the engines began to grind.

Immediately, he was back at Rose's side.

"Are you OK?" he gasped.

"Think so," she said, smiling through a split lip. "Just a bit knocked about, that's all."

"Never, ever do that again, Rose."

"Fall over?"

"Leave somewhere I have told is safe."

"I'm sorry. I know it was stupid—"

"You're telling me."

"—but I just panicked. I didn't want to be left without you."

"Rose. You know I'd never leave you."

"Excuse me, but if you could just turn this way a moment," came an American voice.

The Doctor and Rose looked behind them. On the scanner were Iris and Jack.

"Any chance of a rendezvous? Or are you two gonna leave me with her?"

"I'm sure you're in good hands, Jack," said the Doctor, "but we can meet on the ninth planet. Should be far enough away to be safe."

"OK, Doc. We'll see you there." And with that, he was gone.

This planet was even colder than the previous one. The four travellers stood between the two TARDISes.

"So, what was it, exactly?" asked Jack.

"Some kind of extradimensional entity," said the Doctor. "Must have existed between striations in the continuum. Slipped through with Iris's TARDIS, I expect. Started using the local matter to build itself a stable form. Perfectly harmless now. Just one more life form for the Universe. Bit bigger than the usual, of course."

"I'm so sorry, Doctor," said Iris. "The whole thing's my fault."

"Yeah, well," said the Doctor. "I suppose it was. Never mind, eh? All's well and all."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"I, uh, think we'd best get that kettle on, huh, Rose?" said Jack.

"Oh, right. Good idea." They both entered the police box, closing the door behind them.

The Doctor put his hands on Iris's.

"You could come with us, y'know. Knock about the Universe together. Just like old times."

"No," she sighed, "I'd best get back to my rightful place. Always so much to do. I'm sorry about your Time Lords. Perhaps you could come with me?"

"Then there'd be no one left at all. Being alone is bad enough, but it's better than there being nobody. At least this way, someone will remember them."

"You're not alone, Doctor. Not at all, from the looks of it. I hope you're very happy together."

"What do you mean?"

"You always were a bit slow, weren't you, Doctor?"

And with that, she kissed him, then walked back to her ship.

The Doctor was still standing there when it had faded away.

Cabinet of Changes

Philip Purse-Hallard (with thanks to Paul Magrs & Jeremy Hoad)

I

That old television set's a nuisance. It seems to only pick up children's programmes from the sixties. Andy Pandy, Muffin the Mule, Bill and Ben. *All classics, of course. But last night Fitz wanted to* watch NYPD Blue, *and the nearest I could get for him was* Dixon of Dock Green.

I think he misses Compassion more than he lets on.

'It's therapy for him, I reckon,' Fitz confided to Sally as he took her coat. 'He's getting better all the time.'

Sally was non-committal. 'He seems a bit more cheerful since his leg cleared up.' She opened up her dog-basket, trying to calm Canine's excited yaps. Fitz regarded the dog narrowly. He hadn't trusted it an inch since the time he'd got plastered and it talked to him. He still wasn't sure which one of them was to blame for that.

'Well, I think it's a waste of time,' Compassion declared loudly. 'A magic show, Indeed. He'll be going on Stars In their Eyes next.' She was leaning at a sarcastic angle against the door to the living room. Probably resented the Doctor monopolising the room with the TV In, Fitz thought.

'I wouldn't put it past him,' Sally smirked. 'Canine seems a bit excited, don't you pet? think he smells something.

Ah, that'll be Wesley,' Fitz told her. 'The Doctor's cat. It's OK, she's shut away. He kind of took pity on her and now she lives here.'

'She took advantage of him, If you ask me,' Compassion said tartly. She'd not seen the attraction, even though the poor thing had turned up in the garden clearly starving, little more than a kitten. The Doctor had taken the sodden creature in, dried her with a hairdryer and called her Wesley, for reasons which remained obscure to Fitz. Compassion had been as irritated by the name as by the act of altruism.

Why Wesley?, she'd demanded to know as the little animal lapped hungrily at her bowl of bread and milk. Why not Tasha or Deanna, if the Doctor insisted on a Star Trek name? Or did he mean Wesley from Buffy? They were both as wet as each other, If you asked her. The Doctor had muttered something about great ecclesiastical reformers, and Compassion had rolled her eyes predictably.

Fitz led Sally past Compassion Into the darkened living room. The dining chairs were laid out In a neat row, the big bay window curtained off as a makeshift stage. Tall candlesticks gave out minimal light, and also provided some heat against the chilly spring evening. Sally sat down, setting Canine comfortably on her lap. The dog yawned mightily. Fitz gave it a suspicious look.

'In this light he'll be able to get away with anything,' declared Compassion from behind them. Fitz thought for moment she meant the terrier. 'The less the audience can see, the more the conjuror can do without them noticing.'

'Well, that's all part of the show, I'm sure,' said Sally, realising from Fitz's manic gestures that the Doctor was already onstage, and listening behind the curtain. 'I'm looking forward to It.' The doorbell rang, and Fitz scampered off into the hall.

He knew Compassion and their other guest did not get on. She'd probably send her away, given half the chance.

Iris was standing outside the door, wrapped up In her usual multiple cardigans and brandishing a half-full bottle of Gordon's. 'Fitz, darling!' she cried out enthusiastically. 'Come and help Auntie Iris up the steps, there's a good lad.' She was distinctly wobbly on her pins, Fitz realised. He could see her bus parked right outside, and tried hard not to think of what she'd be like driving. Compassion gave a tiny sniff as Fitz hurried down the steps.

'What's he called us here for this time then?' Iris wondered, leaning heavily on Fitz, and incidentally breathing gin Into his face. 'Another dinner party for his friends?'

'He's giving us a magic show,' Fitz told her as they negotiated the hall. 'It seems to be his latest craze.' 'I spent a while as a magician’s assistant when I was a gal,' said Iris, much Interested. 'The saucy sod kept pulling rabbits out of my cleavage.'

'Did he saw you in half?' wondered Compassion.

'I wouldn't let him, Iris snapped at her. There are limits.' She shouldered her way past her Into the dark room, eager to tap on the fishtank and annoy the Doctor's angel fish,

It turned out that the Doctor had rigged up a big arc lamp, to spotlight him on stage. He wore his usual old-fashioned clothes, which looked magicianly enough to Fitz now he could see them In the appropriate context. The shiny top hat was

a new addition, though. Fltz was sure he could hear it rustling, The Doctor stood between a little baize card table and his magic cabinet, his pride and joy these last few weeks. Big gold letters proclaimed it the CABINET OF CHANGES. Just large enough to hold full-sized person, Its dark surface spangled with glittering stars, it was tall and strangely solid, as If It wasn't made of plywood but of some altogether heavier, more definite material. Fitz hadn't a clue where he'd got It. He'd just found it standing In the living room one day, opposite the fishtank and vivarium, with the Doctor touching up the paintwork as If he'd owned It all his life.

'Ah, we're all here then,' the Doctor said, beaming. 'Then we'll begin.'

I never have found out what's inside. Not really inside.

I mean, it has a false back. It surely must do. How else could it conjure up such promiscuous miscellanies? I close the doors with my magician's flourish on the empty interior, bright black beetle-shell paint covering shabby woodwork, and a moment later it opens on all manner of shiny things. Brass candlesticks and carriage-clocks and mittens. Old opera-glasses, crystal decanters and dusty gramophone records. Great piles of seashells, glistening pink and white. The little pump engine from a Hornby train set. Huge vases of orchids and lilies.

Who puts them there? I can't imagine. I know the cabinet's false back must lead to a monstrous treasure cave; a trove Aladdin or Batman would find scandalous.

Maybe it gives onto the old magician's shop itself, where I found it that April day, that first long walk after the pain in my leg cleared up.

It smelled of incense, that shop. Patchouli, I think - I prefer sandalwood myself. Not that I often bum the stuff these days. Bit of an antisocial habit, but as a friend once told me, I'm just an old hippie at heart. And In the shop it offset the smell of dust and cobwebs, which seemed entirely reasonable.

*The place was full of treasures, a secret hoard of delight and discovery, a relentless cornucopia of finds.*Ye Magick Shoppe *it said above the window, in big mock-Gothic letters, and the Inside I'ved up to the promise. Inside were shelves and shelves of coins and balls and cards and caskets and cups and mirrors, Tarot decks and crystal balls, candles and ! words and huge silk handkerchiefs, all colours. Cages full of doves and rabbits and mice, all white as driven snow. Phrenology heads rubbed cheeks with musty skulls. A wardrobe rail of magician's costumes through the ages - dark blue robes adorned with sliver sigils, silk pyjamas, pointy slippers, tuxedoes with white bow ties and ruffled shirts. Fezzes, berettas, top hats, even tall steepled things with starry sequins. Wands and staffs and rods in all sizes, with Inscriptions in alphabets I'd*

never seen. was in heaven.

The owner was a slim, tall man, a redhead - like Compassion but more fiery. His face was scholarly and lined - but strangely young, as If a weight of future ages still hung upon him. His rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed bracelets Jangling all down one arm, some kind of dragon tattoo writhing up the other. A smart brocade waistcoat looked odd with his crumpled tweed trousers and rumpled socks. A motheaten coat hung on the chair behind him.

- Good afternoon, my friend, he was saying affably, startling green eyes looking up from the red leather book he was perusing. That Incense smell got stronger as [approached him. - And It is, Indeed, a good afternoon. Might I ask If you're just here to browse, or is there something particular with which / can help you?

just then I saw. Behind him was the cabinet.

It stood a tallish person's height, dark blue and silver, an obstinately rectangular night sky of bright gold stars. I could have climbed inside immediately, so strong was its fascination for me. The doors were dosed, the words CABINET OF CHANGES *blazoned across them in golden letters.*

Could I have a look at that? I asked him.

- Ah, yes, the owner said calmly behind me. - It's a fine piece, the transmutation cabinet. Very versatile.

Moving closer, I saw the huge Iron key in one door, the tiny face-high hatch in the other through which someone could look out, the narrow slits for pushing swords into a volunteer victim. The cabinet called to something old in me- childhood memories of the Narnia books, perhaps, a secret wardrobe full of fur and mothballs, leading to an enchanted frosty wood. Or the wooden chests in Mother's sinister nursery stories, where mermaid's' husbands keep their seal-skins to stop them fleeing back into the ocean.

- I'll take It, I told him. I knew I couldn't really afford it. I can be pretty impulsive when something takes my fancy that way.

HIs tone was doubtful.

The cabinet can be a little... risky, or perhaps I should say unpredictable, in the hands of a dabbler. He gave me a long, appraising look. - But I apologise. I can see you are a professional, my friend. He took a deep breath. - Twenty pounds.

It was worth far more than that. I could tell, but he would take no argument. Twenty pounds was all he'd take, or there would be no sale. I knew I was already mine - the paying for it was just a little ritual we had to go through before we could be together, my bold blue cabinet and I.

I had to use his phone to call a taxi. It came to collect me and my splendid

new acquisition, and bring us home.

Before we could get it Into the car, I had to take out two cigar-store Indians, a half-length wooden mirror and a bookcase full of shoes.

The Doctor spent a moment gazing In admiration at his magic cabinet, then turned to his audience.

Clearing his throat with a magician's hauteur, he began. 'Allow me to Introduce myself—'

‘We all know you, Doctor,’ put in Iris.

'I,' the Doctor proclaimed, determinedly, 'am that mysterious practitioner of the esoteric arts known only as the Doctor. And this —' he gestured expansively, in case they had trouble distinguishing which Item of furniture he might be referring to ‘Is my magic cabinet.'

'Hello, Doctor,' Iris parroted. 'Cooee, cabinet.'

‘Shut up,' Compassion urged her fiercely. 'Doctor, get on with It. Now It actually came down to it, she seemed strangely eager to be entertained. The Doctor pouted for a moment, then began the show.

It wasn't exactly world class, but Fitz found himself impressed by the Doctor's patter. Say what you liked about him, he certainly had the gift of the gab. The gift of skill at conjuring tricks was another matter, though. The card tricks went reasonably well, although It was difficult to overlook the fact that the 'pack' of cards he was using was so old, battered and heterogeneous (some of them even had naked women on the back, Fitz noted with Interest) that they could be told apart at a distance of twenty paces. The disappearing tricks were less successful, unless you looked on them as things-vanishing-up-sleeves tricks, in which case they just about worked. The cup-and-ball trick performed with clear plastic beakers was, Fitz thought, almost definitely best forgotten.

Still, the audience were moderately enthusiastic — even the giant lizard in the vivarium seemed interested. Sally was watching with determined appreciation, and Iris was clearly enjoying the show as comedy, laughing uproariously when things went wrong, despite some filthy looks from the Doctor.

Compassion was scowling with a fierce concentration which Fitz found mildly unsettling. Only Canine had decided to go to sleep.

When the Doctor called for a volunteer, Fitz realised he ought to show a bit of support, although If he was honest what he wanted to be expressing was embarrassment and dread. He was surprised when Compassion Immediately stood up.

'The lady in the camouflage trousers, yes you madam, come on down!' the Doctor called from around five feet in front of her. She complied.

You sure you want to do this?' Fitz hissed at her as she stood up, but she ignored him.

'Now, Comp- now, madam. Would you care to examine this television set?' the Doctor suggested, Indicating it with a melodramatic finger.

Compassion glanced at it. It was of battered black plastic, with a metal stand. 'I've seen it before. It's a perfectly ordinary TV. Except the teletext is broken.'

'A perfectly ordinary TV, exactly,' cried the Doctor triumphantly. 'And would you care to examine this perfectly extraordinary magical cabinet of metamorphosis and transmutation?' Compassion did so. She walked all the way around, staring sceptically at its every inch of paintwork. The Doctor hrr'mphed Impatiently a couple of times, but she obstinately refused to be hurried.

The outside seems normal enough," she finally acknowledged suspiciously. 'What about the inside?'

'Ah ah, patience, Compassion, I mean madam,' declared the Doctor. 'We'll come to that'

'Observe carefully, madam, as I place this perfectly ordinary television set (Goodness, that's heavy, do you think you could give me a hand? Thanks) - Observe carefully as you help me place this perfectly ordinary television set Inside the cabinet of transformation. Thank you - ah, Fitz, could you come and open the doors, do you think? That's It, just turn the key and clear away anything you find In there. No, I've no Idea what it is — some kind of stuffed fish? Never mind. Now, Compassion, If we could put it down just *here* -— thank you so very much.'

They both stood back and regarded the TV for a few seconds, defying it to move from its place Inside the cabinet. Fitz rather awkwardly returned to his seat, leaving what appeared to be a stuffed and mounted mer-parrot on the Doctor's card table.

'Now, madam, said the Doctor once again. 'Observe as I lock the doors to the cabinet, like this —' he did so, with a further flourish — 'Then let's retire to a safe distance while I say the magic words."

Compassion seemed entirely caught up in the act by now, obeying without a moment's hesitation.

The Doctor pointed his fingers at the cabinet with an arcane gesture and let out in one long breath a string of occult syllables. Fitz thought they Included a couple of makes of car.

The cabinet sat unchanged In front of them, entirely falling to emit dramatic flashes or puffs of smoke.

The Doctor held up his hand for silence. HIs hat rustled loudly, and shifted slightly on his head. Iris giggled. 'Perhaps you'd care to open up the doors,

madam?' he suggested to Compassion with great dignity, handing her the key. 'Careful now.'

As the doors opened, It took the five of them a moment to register that the TV set had, In fact, vanished, to be replaced by a chamber pot full of dried pampas grass. There was a numb silence for a moment, then Fitz joined in a resounding round of applause.

‘Thank you, thank you,' beamed the Doctor modestly, looking quite relieved. He bowed and doffed his hat In acknowledgement, sending two angry doves speeding in a wide arc across the room.

Recovering, one settled on the fishtank, while the other circled the light fitting. Iris cackled like a mad thing as It crapped on Fitz's shoulder. The Doctor stared defiantly at the celling until the disturbance had died down.

'Now, madam, If you'd care to examine the Inside of the cabinet, as we agreed?' Compassion gave him a look. 'You'll see that there are no false bottoms, no trapdoors, no mirrors, indeed no trickery of any kind.'

Kicking the commode out of the way, Compassion stepped Inside, and stared intently around her.

‘There must be something.'

‘Why must there?' the Doctor bridled. 'Are you questioning the alchemical skill of the legendary Doctor? The walls and celling are a bit too thin to fit a whole TV, think you'll filnd.'

Compassion was adamant. 'Television sets don't just vanish.' She got down on her hands and knees, and started tapping the floor suspiciously.

'Oh, come on, Compassion, there's no trapdoor in the living room floor!' the Doctor exploded, dropping out of character. 'Face It, It's magic!'

Compassion looked him in the eye. 'There's no such thing.'

The Doctor glared back. 'Then perhaps you'd care to stay Inside the cabinet while I bring the television back?'

'I wouldn't see anything. It's dark in there,' Compassion pointed out sensibly.

"I've got a torch!' exclaimed Sally suddenly. She ferreted around In her handbag. 'In case of sudden blackouts or breakdowns In the middle of nowhere.' She pulled out a pencil torch, which she flicked on Immediately. A strong beam lanced out across the room, waking Canine who yelped In surprise.

'If you could pass it over then, please, second madam? Many thanks. Now, Com- now, madam, take the torch, and remain in the cabinet, if you please.' Compassion seemed all too keen, Fitz thought.

He realised why she'd been so intent on the magic show she'd been waiting for a trick to go right all this time, so she could then work out how it had been done. Not that she wanted to spoil it for the rest of them, she just had a yearning to

reduce things to the explicable. She must have found the show so far a bit of a let-down.

He thought he'd also detected a selfish panic in her eyes at the disappearance of the TV.

The Doctor, impatient to prove his point, was already closing the doors on her. 'With our sceptical young volunteer now in place,' he was intoning, 'we must reverse the words of magic which caused the vanishment to occur. If 1 can remember what they were, that is, he added, concern creasing his face for just a moment.

Iris leant over to hiss to Fitz. 'That's a pretty good trick, you know. All done with a rotating floor thingamajig, I expect. It's daft to leave that girl In there with a torch, though. She'll soon spot what's going on.'

The Doctor let fly a second string of syllables, Indistinguishable by Fitz from the first (although now he was listening more closely, he'd a feeling he heard a rude word In there somewhere). As before, the cabinet reacted with stolid Indifference.

The Doctor tapped on the cabinet's doors. 'Are you all right In there, Compassion?' he called. There was silence. 'She'll be dumbstruck by the inexplicability of the reappearance, I expect,' he stated confidently. 'Compassion? Are you all right?" He turned back to the audience. 'Ah, well, let's see, shall we?'

He slid open the viewing panel in the left hand door, and peered inside. His face registered mild panic.

Turning they key once more, he threw open the doors explosively, then turned towards the room for a triumphant bow. Then suddenly whirled back to face the cabinet.

Inside sat an ancient Bakelite television set, far older than the one they'd put Inside, with a knob for changing channels and a tiny mirrored screen. On top of It stood a three-foot plaster Virgin Mary.

Of Compassion there was absolutely no sign.

That old TV set's been a pain in the neck from day one. But of course It's the only one we've got now.

Whoops

I'm more concerned About poor Compassion, though. I suppose she must be still there In the cabinet . wherever all the things in there come from. I can't Imagine how they fit - the funk it's thrown at me has already overflowed the attic, and started filling up Compassion's floor as well. It's stacked up to the celling in huge toppling piles, great towers of lumber and mirror and brass. It's

not safe to go in there any more.

I think the box did It deliberately. It saw me taking all the credit for the television's miraculous disappearance, and decided to teach me a lesson. Selfish thing.

At least Compassion's got our actual TV set In there with her. She won't want for entertainment When she vanished, we searched the living room thoroughly, and then the house. When we realised she was really gone - and I'd convinced the others I had no idea how to get her back Iris took charge.

She can be an annoying old fusspot, but she's handy in a crisis.

- *You stupid old fool, she said to me (and with fairly good reason, although did resent her calling me old). — What on earth did you think you were doing, putting someone into a working magic cabinet? Who knows what might have happened to her in there!*

Oh, she was cross.

- *I'm sorry, I said, humbly. I was really quite shaken by the whole thing.*

— I should think so tool Now, what were the words you used?

But the words no longer worked. Which isn't surprising, since I now know it was the cabinet working the trick, not me. Closing and reopening the doors yielded up a collection of gaudy Russian dolls, rubber swordfish and a great big gong, but that was about it. However many times we intoned the words, made the gestures or just shouted at the cabinet to bring her back, it obstinately churned out random junk instead.

Eventually we gave up and drifted off. Iris filched a bottle of vodka from the kitchen and stormed off in her bus, still ranting about Irresponsible meddling and the consequences of your actions. Sally gave me a comforting peck on the cheek, packed her dog up in his basket and went home.

Fitz plugged in the old bakerite telly and started watching The Black and White Minstrel Show. — I can't believe they're repeating this, he kept muttering to himself.

I took off my top hat and fed my fish, then tried to get my doves down from the furniture.

And all the time the cabinet was sitting there in the corner. I didn't feel it was watching me or anything silly like that. It didn't need to. It was just there, purposeful and patient, with an agenda I *knew nothing about. Obstinate blue oblong that It was, full of stars like that sinister Monolith from 2001, it had transported Compassion to who knows where, and might be doing who knows what to her inside itself. I've known It was aware from our first meeting - when I first saw it, I'd say, If meeting wasn't exactly how It had felt. I'd been so eager to get it home and test its magic properties. Now I was afraid. it has a power*

nobody warned me about.

What If I open It one day, In mid-conjuration or to give it a bit of a dust inside, and instead of random furniture find somebody standing there? Someone who once vanished inside? One of those so-called Glass Men of Valcea, or the other hideous creatures In my dreams? Or lust someone who seems-human-but-who-knows? Perhaps even a person the cabinet has put together Itself, to do its bidding?

II

Romy was a friend of the Doctor's Fitz hadn't met before. He'd heard the Doctor talk about her, of course she was one of his oldest friends, and Fitz rather suspected they'd been a little more than that in their time - but it seemed they didn't see a lot of each other these days. She'd joined a church of some kind, with peculiar modern views Fitz gathered, and seemed to have become something rather high up in it, locally at least. She was very busy with the needs of her congregation, the Doctor said, and didn't have a lot of time for social visits.

He had particularly asked her to be here tonight, though. Fitz wasn't sure why. The Doctor hadn't been keen on seeing Sally or Iris since the business with - well, since Compassion went missing. (They'd never talked about It, but they were keeping her part of the house free for her, or as free as the enormous piles of tacky ornaments would allow.) Which meant that for tonight it was just Fitz, the Doctor and Romy.

Fitz wasn't certain how he felt about that, but he was careful to be cordial enough when Romy arrived.

She was a tremendously upright person, Fitz realised, not even a hint of bending in her carriage. As a general slouch-about himself, he found that a little intimidating. Her features were still beautiful, despite her middle age when she was younger, she must have been an absolute stunner. Lucky old Doctor.

She was wearing a plain black cassock and dog collar, although from what Fitz heard he was doubtful she was strictly entitled to them. Her shoulder-length greying-blond hair was In a sensible bob, and her manner was frighteningly, schoolmistressly sensible.

‘You must be Fitz,' she noted. 'The Doctor's told me about you.' Her voice suggested that she was carefully reserving judgement. Fitz tried surreptitiously to hold himself up straighter.

'Er, I think he's getting ready,' he told her, trying not to sound defensive. 'Do you want to come through to the living room? Can I get you a drink or anything?'

Romy gave him a cool, appraising look, then smiled. Fitz relaxed slightly, feeling as if someone had turned his body temperature up several degrees. 'Perhaps, Fitz,' Romy said conspiratorially, 'you can tell me what all this Is about? The Doctor phoned me this morning and told me it was terribly urgent come over tonight. You know what he's like when he gets an idea into his head. I had to postpone an elders' meeting. I'd like to say I won't lose any sleep over it, but in the purely literal sense that's probably not true. I had no Idea how dull they could be.' She paused. She was trying to put him at his ease, Fitz could tell, but she still wanted answers.

'Er,' said Fltz. 'I think, well, you know what he's like. The fact Is, he said, 'I think he wants to put on a magic show for us.

The look she gave him made him hope earnestly she never came visiting when he was sick.

The cabinet gave me a glit this morning. That's how I know it's forgiven me at last.

I've got Into the habit of opening it first thing when I get up. I've no real hope that Compassion will reappear overnight, but I'd never forgive myself If I didn't check. I've given up taking out the funk it produces, though . It's filled all the available rooms, and If I leave It In there, I find It's turned Into something else next time take a look.

This morning, though, It gave me something beautiful. I opened it up and there it was, the size of a person, filling the cabinet's interior with gorgeous prismatic colour. With Fitz's reluctant help I lifted it out, and we staggered with it up Into the attic. There I cleared a space around the skylight, so the sun could shine right through It.

It's a stained-glass window, deepest blue like the cabinet Itself. Etched In vibrant colours, crimson and flame-yellow and copper-green, It depicts life-sized figure, with many faces like a Hindu god. The glass man wears an azure suit of armour, holds a sword and shield like some crusading knight, and in the centre of his chest are laid out two scarlet hearts, vital and glowing as If the artist has trapped their double rhythm Inside the glass Itself. His faces are all different - some I think I recognise, including my own, some are strangers to me. Instead of a cross, the shield bears a point d'interrogation gules upon a field argent. So my heraldic dictionary tells me.

As I look closer, though, I see that the figure Is made up of smaller Images, tiny pictures complete in themselves, all merging to form the figure of the great glass knight. Scrabbling around, my hand hinds a magnifying glass In one of the tea-chests. Peering at these little pictures, I see that they, too, are made up from

smaller scenes, Intricately etched with detail vanishing into the Infinitesimal. From distance the colours merge to form the bold colours of the figure and his background, but up close there are deep oranges and browns, rich purples and greens, harmoniously blending Into his armoured body like tattoos.

Staring enthralled at the tiny Images, I see a
woman In white silk with a flower necklace and corn-gold hair
bone-brittle dinosaur glowering and snapping from a dark earth wall
mansion-house straddled by a jack-1'-th'-green plant-giant
buttery clock softening and melting dripping time down the wall
bright globe with verdant countries smiling against a landscaped sky
shiny fool's-gold handbag with an angry Disney scowl
bloated sun raining fire on a new desert of burning metal
man of scraps and fragments his arm a crab's claw his head a fish-bowl
flaming tiger crouched to spring in snowy woodland
million tiny Images made of sharp and glittering contours; shards and fragments and splinters of bright glass joining in magnificent sapphire splendour to create the virtuous, vitreous figure of the many-headed knight In his magnificent armour.

Fltz felt he'd probably reached his limit when the Doctor asked him to hand over his mobile phone.

'You're going to smash it with a hammer, aren't you?' he stated bluntly.

The Doctor grinned. 'Come on, Fitz - that Is, come on, member of the audience who haven't previously met. Have a little faith.'

Fitz glanced In mute appeal at Romy, the other half of the Doctor's select audience, but she returned is gaze serenely. She'd shown surprising patience with the Doctor, presumably reasoning that I he'd lost tis marbles it was best to go along with It until they could both wrestle him to the ground and tie him up.

He supposed she was right. Whatever had produced the Doctor's sudden defiant urge for a repeat performance, it wasn't amenable to argument, as he'd discovered at considerable length that lunchtime. Which meant the two of them had to go along with the magic show for the moment, unless it looked like anyone was actually going to get hurt. Meekly, he handed over the phone, trying to work out when he might afford another.

The Doctor wrapped the mobile in a purple silk cloth, and placed It with a flourish Into paper bag.

He seemed serenely unaware that the bag had 'Boots the Chemist plc' printed on it In large letters.

‘A hammer would be a crude Implement for such a skilled esoteric professional as I,' the Doctor Intoned. 'I prefer to use ~ a walking boot!'

'Oh, Christ, said Fitz.

The Doctor produced a leather boot from under the table, and brought It crashing down onto the paper bag, grinning like a maniac all the time. The bag's contents gave forlorn bleep, then fell silent as the Doctor pounded them to pieces.

'Brilliant," Fitz told him. 'What next, you magic the cost of a new one out of thin air?

‘Watch,' commanded the Doctor, 'and learn. Crossing to the so-called magic cabinet, he threw open the double doors as if expecting a fanfare. Inside, lying on a raffia mat atop a folded deckchalr, was a second Boots bag.

'Behold!' the Doctor cried.

'What's that, Fitz asked in exasperation, 'one you prepared earlier?'

'Now,' the Doctor said, excitement ringing through his voice. 'Perhaps, sir, you'd care to look inside that bag?'

Fitz did so. It contained a second silk cloth of the same colour, Inside which was a second mobile phone, also in tiny pieces.

'Is that your portable telephone, sir?' the Doctor asked.

'No,' Fitz said. 'That's my portable bloody telephone,' he pointed out, Indicating the bag still lying on the card table. 'This,' he explained, 'is some other poor bastard's which you've also smashed up.

'Oh, no!' the Doctor was put out. 'No no, ignore that first one.' He threw the first bag Into the cabinet, slamming the doors closed hurriedly. 'Take my word for It, that is your mobile phone.'

'No, Doctor, It Isn't.'

'Yes It Is,' the Doctor Insisted. 'Look, It's all in bits where smashed it with the boot!'

'Well, thank you so much.'

‘I should think so, too. Now, lady and gentleman - sit down, Fitz, that's your bit over with, thank you - now, lady and gentleman: behold this magic cabinet of transmogrification. Behold this television set.

As he sat down Fitz gave a tiny groan of terror. He hadn't had time to tell Romy what had happened at the Doctor's last performance. He supposed, If the Doctor tried to make her get into the cabinet, he could shout a warning, bash the Doctor over the head, and then the two of them could make a run for it. She might even be grateful to him for saving her life. There was something to be said for an attractive mature woman, after all, and she might well feel that a younger man -

Shit. You're losing It, Fitz. She's a vicar, for Christ's sake.

The Doctor had apparently decided not to request a helpless female volunteer on this occasion. Instead he was removing from the cabinet the deck chair, the raffia mat and, seemingly, a working model lighthouse made from shells. He produced a dusty porter's trolley from somewhere - It was probably one of the offerings the cabinet itself had left him over the last few weeks - and was using It to heft the ancient black and white television set inside.

Deciding that the trick was probably safe so long as no human beings were directly involved, Fitz subsided nervously.

'Behold,' the Doctor continued at length, slightly out of breath, 'this perfectly ordinary, if rather archaic, television set inside the cabinet of transmutation. Now, the cabinet is an artefact of rare power and magickal energy, whereas I,' he coughed nervously, 'am merely a humble dabbler in the backwaters of the conjuror's art. For this reason, offer up this anomalous antique television to the cabinet, in exchange for any favours it may deign to grant me.

That was surely laying on the arcane patter a bit thick, thought Fitz. And besides, If he'd understood the Doctor's meaning correctly they might soon end up with no TV at all. He cleared his throat in protest, but the Doctor was in no mood to brook disagreement.

'I close the doors of the cabinet *like this,* lock them securely with this iron key, then leave the cabinet to work Its enchantments. The Doctor looked round nervously, as If for something to do, and then his gaze lighted on his audience. 'Can get you two a cup of tea while we walt?' he suggested.

I'll do It,' said Fitz quickly, and left the room. He couldn't stand the tension any more. Let Romy talk some sense into him, or let him bundle her off into the cabinet. He really didn't care any more.

It took him perhaps ten minutes to fill the kettle, greet Wesley the kitten, warm the pot, find the teabags, pour out some milk in the special jug the Doctor liked to use when there were guests, pour more milk Into the special saucer Wesley liked to use when there was milk, and set out three matching mugs onto the silver tea-tray. By that time, he hoped, things might have calmed down a bit.

When he got back to the living room, he found Compassion chatting amiably to the Doctor and Romy.

That he'd been vaguely prepared for. It was the only thing that made sense of the Doctor's behaviour all day, after all. What he hadn't expected was for her to rush over and give him a huge hug.

Compassion still won't say what happened to her during her time inside the cabinet, and perhaps It's just as well. Either she either can't remember herself,

or else she knows it's better for us — for Fitz and me - not to know.

She's a caring kid at heart, I've always said so. I must say that side of her's been to the fore since she came out of the cabinet. Being shut Inside can do that sort of thing to you. Enforced isolation, perhaps (but maybe she met others in there?) Confined spaces (or are they?) Sensory deprivation, even (or is the interior of the cabinet every bit as marvellous and dazzling as the stained glass window iIt created for me?) Bound to have an effect.

I don't know if she's told any of this to Romy. Those two have been thick as thieves since It happened.

They'd never met before - Romy comes from a very long-ago time in my life, and unlike Sally these days hardly see her from one year to the next. Compassion is a relatively new companion in the house. The first time they saw each other was when I unlocked the cabinet that evening and Compassion fell into my ready arms. I admit I wobbled a little bit - she's a big girl. She was surprisingly affectionate and clingy, like a haughty cat who's let out after shutting herself In a cupboard all day, It must have been traumatic for her, as I say, although I do wish I had more idea of how. When she hugged Fitz he dropped the tea things everywhere. He was sorry and shocked, he forgave me for smashing his phone. Well, agreed to let me pay him back in instalments.

Anyway. It was after that, when we'd all sat down with a nice fresh pot and explained to Romy what was going on, that I realised how cagey Compassion was being. Every time I asked about the inside of the cabinet, she deflected it by asking how we'd been while she'd been away.

Time was she'd just have told me to mind my own business. But we were seeing a new side to her —— sensitive, tactful even — and she was keen not to upset me. Maybe she realised how guilty I felt about sending her in there in the first place. Soon she and Romy were talking cheerfully to each other over their tea, sharing the odd joke. It takes a perceptive person to see through Romy's aloof demeanour, and although she'd hate me to say so she doesn't make friends easily. I was glad she and Compassion were hitting it off.

But then Compassion's been far more mellow since it all happened. I'm sure Fitz found her much easter to live with over those next few weeks. She washed up without being asked, did her share of the cleaning and shopping, even cooked us a couple of really remarkable meals. Even little Wesley became very fond of her. Once Fitz had stopped trying to keep the two of them apart, she often came to rub against her legs and have her chin scratched. The cat, that is.

Romy came to visit often during that time, more than she had for years - but it was Compassion, not me, who she came to see. I could have felt a little put out about that, but I thought perhaps Compassion had found she could confide in

Romy. I've noticed her clerical manner will do that sometimes. they spent a lot of time together, out in the tiny garden, or up in Compassion's room. When we'd managed to get It cleared, that Is, so she could live there properly again. I was glad Romy was taking Compassion out of herself a little. I'd hoped the original television might have come back with her, but obviously not, and she was at a bit of a loose end without it.

Then one day, out of the blue, she announced that she was moving out. Moving out of my house, and moving in with Romy.

It's difficult to know quite what to say to that. Of course I'm delighted for the pair of them, and said so.

Fitz was more surprised than I was - he's very old-fashioned in some ways. He said something mind-bendingly inappropriate about 'chick on chick action', then looked desperately embarrassed. Compassion scowled — she can still scowl like a champion when she wants to — and though I could tell Romy was trying not to giggle, I think Fitz thought she was about to call the police.

I'm enormously happy for them, I really am. They're lovely people and they've both had their share of tragedy. Compassion's an orphan, like Fitz, except she never even knew her parents — and Romy's been through some traumatic times since we went our separate ways. They both deserve a little happiness in life.

1 just can't help wondering If it's all thanks to my magic cabinet. I'm sure they'd never have been each other's type before, you see. I'd die rather than say it to either of them, but they were too alike. Aloof, haughty, distant — each with hidden depths to be sure, but would they ever have discovered them if the cabinet hadn't turned Compassion inside out like that? The magic worlds the cabinet led her into were the unexpected vistas of her own heart and now those depths are on the outside, what else might there be to discover inside her, I wonder?

What might Romy have seen in her, before? What does she find there now? Is the cabinet responsible for all this? Am I responsible?

III

I think it may be time to see my private doctor again. Instead, though, I went this morning to the old magic shop.

Ye Magick Shoppe *was just as before. But this time I saw a painful visual jangle of richness and colour, the tawdry and the terrible mixed up and spat out into a riotous jumble of misplaced symbolism, pagan and appalling. That Incense smell, the cobwebs on the celling, the costumes and the props were all the same only the cabinet had gone. And he still sat there, in the same spot, a*

spider In an ancient web that caught and held passing ideas and made them real, signified becoming signifier before his bright green, young-old eyes.

- *Good day to you, sir, he told me.— And a good day once again it is, I'm sure. Can I help you?*

I had the strangest feeling that the things he said hid something else behind them, vitally important but entirely unsaid. But I was In no mood for riddles.

- *What's Inside the cabinet? I demanded.*
- *The transmutation cabinet? Ah, yes. A fine piece, that one. I've had her longer than I can remember.*

His bright eyes took and held mine, and I realised where I recognised them from. His face was one of those belonging to my many-visaged knight of shining glass.

- *Have you over been Inside It? I repeated.*
- *Once, he said. — Have you?*
- *A young friend of mine did. She was gone month. We've no idea what happened to her in there.*
- *Ah*

I was infuriated by his evasiveness.

- *What Is it? I fairly bellowed at him.—- Is It a miracle, or a curse? Ii it alive? Where does the furniture come from? Where do the people go? Does it open on to Heaven, or Hell, or, or — or Fairyland? What did it do to my friend? What's It doing to me?*

(As I said, it might be time to go and see my doctor.)

- *I've no Idea, said the owner steadily.*

We paused — him calm, me simply out of breath.

- I stocked this shop from that cabinet, he told me ruminatively. - It took me years, and I had to throw away an awful lot of rubbish, but the stock I've got will last me the rest of my life here.

— And once... you went inside? I whispered.

— I did, he said. - I went in, and I stayed there seven days. Then I came out again. I've never been the same since, nor will your young friend ever be. Nor will you, If you will take what It offers you.

I remembered to breathe. There was a very long pause.

- *I wonder if you would please do something for me? ! asked the magic shop owner humbly.*

It was when he welcomed the fourteenth guest of the evening Into the Doctor's hall that It suddenly occurred to Fitz to wonder how come he always got reception duty.

As It happened, the fourteenth guest was Sally, and she had a ready answer for him. 'He hates hellos,' she explained bizarrely. They remind him of goodbyes. I think he likes to believe all his friends live with him In his giant house and he just runs into them occasionally.' She started to help the fifteenth guest out of his dog-basket. Fitz looked at Canine narrowly, and hoped Wesley had had the sense to clear off for the evening. She was getting quite independent now, and the Doctor had joined forces with their new house-guest, Anji, to fit her a smart new catflap in the kitchen door.

Fitz showed Sally through. This looked like being the Doctor's grandest do yet. The curtains were already open, and the magical paraphernalia laid out. The cabinet and the card table had been surrounded by an extra ring of the tall candlesticks. The cabinet's doors were spread wide open, the box resplendently empty, freshly touched-up black paint glittering proudly as it faced the audience.

The living room was already filled near bursting with the Doctor's audience. Compassion smiled at them from where she sat, while Romy favoured Fitz with a solemn wink. Anji was by the angelfish, pouring out wine for everybody; the Doctor's friend Benny, who worked at the Museum and whom Fitz had fancied the pants off for a couple of months, was helping eagerly. She set down an empty bottle on top of the vivarium, and the huge lizard snapped up at it in anger. Fitz recognised only a handful of the other guests, and before tonight had known none of them to speak to. A man the Doctor's age, moustached and dressed in a smart blazer; a young couple with a baby from Romy's church; the muscular young neighbourhood policeman, who was wearing an earring now he wasn't on duty. Fitz was amused to note that the rest were pretty women of various ages.

Fitz tried to settle Sally among the rest of them, but she was nervous. Understandable enough after the last time, though she was evidently relieved to see Compassion alive and well. At length, she asked him to mind Canine while she went to the loo. Fitz took the terrier back out Into the hall, and watched through the front door as Iris' bus drew up across the street.

There are an awful lot of people here tonight, aren't there?' observed the dog at his feet.

'Bloody are as well," agreed Fitz absently.

Iris was carrying something out of her bus, an old-fashioned wheelchair by the looks of things. The old girl's stronger than she looks, Fitz realised, as she climbed back up the step. Was she the last of them, he wondered? He made that sixteen . that was everybody, surely? He couldn't remember who exactly the total included — not the Doctor, obviously, but him and Anji? Had the baby counted? And did Canine count as a person, or Fitz looked down at the terrier with a

sudden jolt. Christ, you're talking again!' he hissed. 'And this time I'm not even pissed!'

'Language,' said Canine primly.

A passer-by in a coat that looked like half a dead camel had stopped to help Iris. Fitz realised they were carrying a passenger out of the bus, an old woman whom they set down in the bath chair. There was something strangely sinuous about her legs. As Iris fussed about her, the newcomer looked over towards Fitz. Even In the sodium street light, the brightness of his fierce red hair was striking.

'I've known the Doctor longer than you,' said Canine. 'I think he's planning something.' He scratched an ear violently with one back paw. 'Ooh, that's better. Hey, can I smell a cat round here somewhere?" Suddenly, the Doctor was next to Fitz, far too excited to notice trivialities like a dog talking. 'Come on, Fitz,' he insisted, 'come and help her in! These are the last three!' He bounded down the steps and across the road. Fitz and Canine followed apathetically.

The Doctor was making a bee-line for the old woman in the wheelchair, whom the flame-haired stranger was pushing along as If he'd known her all his life. 'Mother!' the Doctor cried out. Fitz stopped dead.

'Jonny!' the old woman called back, legs twitching strangely underneath their blanket. Her vowels were distinctly continental.

'His name Is Jonny?' Fitz whispered, aghast. Then, 'He has a mother?' He massaged his brow wearily.

Then he peered down at the dog, who was regarding him with caution.

You say he's planning something?" Fitz asked.

Ever since I found the cabinet I've had the strangest feeling it's trying to communicate with me somehow.

Like kidnapping one of my friends was just a way of getting my attention. All the artefacts it spews out, till the place where I live resembles an abandoned junkyard — am I supposed to recognise them? Or does It just want to feel at home? The old black-and-white TV — was that a hint of some kind? And what about the stained-glass window, the hero with a thousand faces, one of them my own? Is it supposed to tell me something?

Compassion, changed by her experiences after the cabinet whisks her away from her home, so that the grumpy old Compassion become the new Compassion, full of love and wonder - is she a message, too? Are these things Intended to remind me of some vital memory?

What the cabinet is, maybe?

There's only one way , I can possibly find out. I must enter the cabinet myself.

Then, with the old magician's help, I must pass deeper, through the false back,

that treacherous fourth wall, and into whatever chasms lie beyond.

What will I find there? What will I be there? Because nobody who enters that cabinet can be the same when they emerge. Will 1 be king of the talking animals In some far land? A merman, my mother's family ascendant at last, in some dark fishy kingdom fathoms deep? A magician, advising a heroic king? Or an armoured knight in sapphire blue, my sword bright and strong and true, my questioning shield trusty and firm?

Whatever I become, I'm sure I'll be more myself than what I've been: an eccentric landlord, a neglectful son, an incompetent conjuror . and at my worst a ranting madman.

Oh, but am I up to playing such a part, whatever It might prove to be? And can I bear the changes the cabinet will bring? What's wrong, after all, with what I am? Except the mad part.

I have my friends. I have my house and my pets. I don't want to abandon them. I hate goodbyes.

I should burn the cabinet, ignite it on a pyre built from the wooden furniture it's so thoughtfully provided. Burn the stained-glass window too, watch those coloured splinters melt and run in bright chromatic rivulets. Watch the cabinet warp and twist, its midnight blue becoming black and charred, Its stars consumed by a fire brighter than their own as orange flames rise high into the night sky. Burn all the possibilities, the destinations, the adventures. Turn back from change, burn away all possibility of being more or less than who am, consume the cabinet in the fires of its own mutability. That would be show to give my audience.

Is that then, finally, who I am?

Who I will be?

No Place Like Home

Stuart Douglas

PARKED IN AN ALLEY, in the overhang of a row of top-heavy buildings, the bus appears completely still and silent. Move towards it and there is a suggestion of a small light to the rear, above the door, and the glint of moonlight on a wing mirror. Move closer still and a finger pressed against metal will discover a tiny vibration and the smallest of noises; a purr of contented feline satisfaction. Don't expect to go any further though, as the door is firmly locked and the technology required to open it does not exist on this world. Other, that is, than in the form of a key currently hanging around the neck of the snoring Ms Iris Wildthyme, upstairs — thoroughly sozzled — in bed.

Iris appears to have been dropped like a discarded doll on the bed and is, to make use of a pertinent phrase, dead to the world. A pink pillow covers the top half of her face and her mouth hangs slackly open, a thin trail of saliva dribbling down to her chin.

Thankfully, an empty bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin is still clutched in one hand, dangling off the side of the bed, suggesting the probable cause of so deep a sleep.

She has not, it seems, been gassed, poisoned or otherwise nefariously nobbled.

Iris is, in fact, so comatose that she snores right through a bright light which unexpectedly comes streaming out of a crack in the far wall of the bus. She stirs a little and lets the bottle fall when the crack becomes a door opening and a Cyberman steps into the bus, but that aside, she sleeps on.

Which is a pity, really, as Iris has been heard to remark that Cybermen are an odd lot at the best of times.

Convinced as they are of their destiny to rule the Universe and convert all bipedal beings to the Cybercause, Iris has said she that she finds it charming that they've never realised that they're just a little bit crappy.

'Remember that time I ended up in the Death Zone on Gallifrey with all the rubbish monsters?' she had asked Jenny (or Benny, she forgot which) one day. 'The Cybermen were there you know, along with the Kandyman, some giant

wasps and that big prawn. But they still didn't realise that that meant they were rubbish. It's quite sweet, really.'

The Cyberman, who is even now stooping slightly to pass through the door in the bus wall, seems designed to illustrate Iris' point. If ever a ruthless killing machine could be said to look sweet, this is that machine. Seven foot high in matte silver boots and with stylised teardrops at the corner of each eye, the Cyberman looks like nothing so much as Mick Ronson in full-on *Spiders* mode. The resemblance is compounded by the t-shirt it's wearing, which reads 'It's smokin' at the Crystal Bucket' above an image of an anthropomorphised horse smoking a long, fat cigarette.

'Most excellent,' the Cyberman says in an affected Californian drawl, 'she's totally crashed.'

He beckons impatiently at the door and starts down the stairs, certain as only a Cyberman can be that he will be followed.

Three figures, each smaller than the Cyberman, hurriedly slip through the door and quickly push it shut behind them.

In the dim light, it would be difficult to definitively identify the tallest of the three, who stands head and shoulders above the other two and is already halfway down the stairs, but the identity of the two smaller, squatter bodies moving towards the stairwell is evident.

Sontarans are clones and should, in theory, be utterly identical. However, unknown processes in the massive cloning vats on Sontara add minor differences to each batch, so that in reality individual Sontaran foot-soldiers can be differentiated from one another by certain subtle clues. Number of fingers is a popular method of identification, but there are others.

In this case, things are made particularly simple by the fact that one Sontaran is wearing a hat with a feather in it, and the other a leather jacket with 'Danny Pain' in metal studs across the back.

Feather Hat clenches his fist together, then re-opens it and points his two fingers at the stairs. Leather Jacket thuds his three-fingered fist into his chest and moves downstairs.

Feather Hat brings up the rear, clutching awkwardly at the stair rail as he descends.

Having slept through an assortment of alien killers wandering through her bedroom, it's a little unfortunate that the sound of the bus door closing wakes Iris up. She sits bolt upright and pushes the pillow to the floor.

'Who the hell's there? I can bloody well see you, you know!' she shouts unconvincingly as she swings herself woozily out of bed, picking up the gin

bottle in one easy motion.

She slips her feet into fluffy pink bunny slippers and moves carefully into the semi-darkness, heading towards the inexplicable crack of light.

The aliens' plan is a simple one.

Sneak off the bus and head into the nearest city with a space port.

Find the seediest looking hostelry in the port.

Pay some grimy captain a large chunk of cash to take them all home.

'It seemed so straightforward back on the bus,' Feather Hat is complaining bitterly. 'And yet here we are. Skulking in the dark, like Rutan scum, awaiting the arrival of this criminal.'

He turns and slaps the other Sontaran on the shoulder. 'We wish to return to the Throneworld. Is that not true, K'Meran?'

K'Meran nods, all the while scanning the end of the alleyway in which they are currently standing. He has an unwieldy plastic rifle clutched precariously in his hands, his thick fingers constantly slipping on the slick coating.

'Hey, watch where you're pointing that thing!'

The final member of the alien party stretches out an arm and pushes the barrel of the rifle to one side before turning away again, examining the far end of the alley. K'Meran could have sworn that the arm had literally stretched to reach the gun, but what could you expect from an Auton?

Autons gave K'Meran chills down his vent.

Especially this one, the only Auton he'd ever heard of who could operate millions of miles and thousands of years away from the Nestene Consciousness. He'd been told in basic training that no Auton could function without the power of the Consciousness, and yet there was no denying the effectiveness of this particular example.

Graeme claimed to have started life as a guerrilla serving utensil of some description and, for all that K'Meran was unsure of what that indicated specifically, he understood that it was a military position and therefore worthy of some respect. More respect, certainly, that was due the Cyberman.

A pacifist Cyberman! Again, his training led him to believe that this was impossible — and again, empirical evidence demonstrated that it was his training which was in error. For a time, he and Commander Storn had considered that either the Auton or the Cyberman (or both) might be Rutan infiltrators, but as time had passed and various anti- Rutan poisons had failed to harm either of them in the slightest, they had agreed that both aliens were as exactly what they claimed to be.

No matter, K'Meran thinks, as he reaches back to scratch a sudden itch round his probic vent — and stops suddenly as a voice speaks in his ear.

'Good evening, gentlemen. I'm Nathan Dexter and I have a laser right against the neck of this Sontaran, so don't try any funny stuff. Shall we go inside for a drink?'

Iris has made it to the back the bus without mishap and is now beginning to feel a little foolish. She takes a generous slug from the bottle and leaves it on a small table covered in possibly - but not probably - antique pill boxes, and then runs a finger along the crack of light emanating from the small section of wall at the top of the stairs.

'Silly old bugger!' she mutters to herself, 'It's just the handbag cupboard'. She pushes one section of the wall and the crack widens then opens fully, revealing a pocket universe which Iris had installed some time previously in order to house her burgeoning collection of handbags, shoes and assorted accessories. Then there had been that unfortunate incident where she'd stuck all her memories onto Marlion recording crystals and Panda had smashed one and she'd forgotten all about the Handbag Universe.

'I bet this place is packed full of great stuff I've completely forgotten about,' she says, as she parts the bead curtain barring the entrance and pokes her head in.

The pub is dingy and dirty, in truth little cleaner than the alleyway outside. Even so, it's obviously popular enough, with sufficient gossiping patrons to cover the sound of individual conversation, and a queue at the bar. There are even a few other non-humans in the room, but the Sontarans and the Cyberman still stand out and, until they move into a shadowy corner, draw inquisitive glances.

Graeme has just lit a cigarette with a handy lighter attachment, and is jabbing it like a knife in Dexter's direction.

'Look, Mr Dexter, all we want is to get back to our own people. We all been stuck on the Bus for a long time and we want to go home.'

The Cyberman looks up, but the Auton cuts him off before he can speak.

'I know, I know — you were just looking for a lift home because you were in no state to drive yourself.'

'Completely wasted, man,' the Cyberman agrees, shaking his head ruefully.

'But the rest of us got sent onto the Bus for a reason and then deserted there,' the Auton concluded. 'We need to get home and explain what happened to us.

Dexter shifts uneasily in his chair; clears his throat. If the aliens could read human body language better they would already know that there is no good news

coming.

'Thing is,' he says quietly, 'I can get you all off this planet. The ship's ready and waiting five minutes away. I've got permits to take off and leave local space and I can get hold of others that'll take us to the places you think you want to go to.'

The Auton tries to interrupt now, but Dexter continues inexorably on, determined to make himself clear.

'What I can't do though is take you all home. Even if I could, I don't know if you really want to go there.'

'Wait a minute,' he says, raising a hand as the Sontarans heave themselves to their feet. 'Hold on while I explain.'

'You,' he says to the Cyberman, 'Uncle Tom Kroton. Do you really think that the Cyberleader will welcome you home with open arms? This is thousands of years before your time. The Cyberlord Hegemony won't appear for millennia. Just now what pass for your ancestors are skulking gypsies, wandering round the cosmos in a handful of stolen spaceships, killing or enslaving everyone they meet.'

'And you two.' Dexter twists in his chair and points his glass at the Sontarans. 'For Goddess' sake, Sontara's gone and you're not even Purebloods! The best you can hope for is to do a runner, get away as far as you can and see if you can get signed on with the Hierarchy out in the Delta Quadrant.'

'As for you,' he continues, gesturing at the Auton, 'everything's changed with the Consciousness too. It's nothing like you remember — you go back there and the best you can hope for is that they melt you down.'

The aliens sit back in thought. There's a lot to take in.

Iris' prowling and meandering through the Handbag Universe has taken an hour or so, and has left her none the wiser but considerably thirstier.

This is much bigger than I remember; she thinks. I don 't think I've ever had enough money to buy something this bloody big.

I wonder if it's anything to do with this little bugger!

She reaches over and gently prods a finger into the golden fabric of a small clutch bag which is lying on a nearby display table.

It's surely not supposed to be throbbing and pulsating like that, is it? It's not natural, that: a handbag wheezing away like one of Darth Vader's lungs.

I should really throw the damn thing away if it's going to go reconfiguring the bus willy-nilly. Or leave it on this planet somewhere. There's bound to be someone I can palm it off on. There was a monastery or something on the way in, for a start.

She picks the bag up and slips an arm delicately through the strap, pausing only to curse loudly as she contrives to pour at least a double of neat gin down herself in the process.

More worrying than lost alcohol, however, are the obvious signs of habitation. Someone has jerry-rigged what looks suspiciously like a Sontaran feeder unit from two pairs of sling-backs Iris had been given by Valerie Solanos and the electronic innards of a twenty-third century iBag, for a start.

'Now, when did I last bump into those no-neck little buggers? That time I was back on Gallifrey, claiming the High Presidency and shanghai-ing those Vardans, I reckon. I could've sworn I'd chucked them all off the bus, though.'

Moving further in, she comes across a shelf hanging in mid-air with a small line of neatly folded XXXL t-shirts on it, each bearing the name of a pub or restaurant in one garish colour or other.

Other minor signs of inhabitation become obvious as Iris takes the long way back to the door - a large pile of soft shoulder bags have been dumped on the floor and obviously used as a bed; someone has torn the stuffing from dozens of teddy bears (now where did they come from — friends of Panda's maybe?) and arranged it into a kind of burrow, and there's pretty explicit graffiti across several walls.

But there's definitely no-one actually there. Iris searches every nook and cranny, sticking her head round every corner and shoving her arm into every dark recess. Could she have bought the universe like this? Maybe she'd made the mess herself - or more likely it had been Flossie on a drunken doggy rampage; or Jenny, hiding out after yet another crushingly embarrassing bout of Time Travellers' Tummy? The graffiti at least sounded like something almost any of her various companions could have written.

Still, there was no-one around now and no lasting damage appeared to have been done.

Anyway, company was company, when all was said and done.

Jenny had skittered off and Benny had dumped her (well OK, she had dumped Benny, but still, there had been definite dumping); Harriet had skipped town while her back was turned and whatshisface... Captain Turner had married that wolf, but one way or another they'd all left. Even Tom had run off with a big bear of a man in the end, declaring his Van Dyke beard to be 'incredibly tickly on the thighs'. He'd taken Panda with him too, the sod.

'And here's me, all on my own. Even he's gone now. Last of the Time Lords, that's me.'

Suddenly maudlin, she kicks at a stray pink mule and begins to walk back to the

exit. There's a bottle of something under her bed, she's sure, and *Brief Encounter* must still be in the video from the last time she'd seen the Doctor.

A good cry always does you good, she decides and with a huge sniff she steps back onto the top floor of the bus.

Much later, the aliens return and unsteadily creep up the bus stairs.

The Sontarans are both wearing sombreros, the Auton is carrying a raffia donkey and, bringing up the rear, the Cyberman is proudly pulling on a t-shirt with the slogan 'Hard Rock Cafe, Artaris' emblazoned across the chest.

They freeze for a moment when they see the open door and sleeping Iris, but know from long experience that she tends to dismiss anything unlikely which may have occurred whilst she was drunk.

They go through into the Handbag Universe and make sure to switch off the light nearest the door, before tying the door handle to a pole some distance away and taping up every point at which fight might escape through the door crack.

Then they wander into the interior of their universe, glad to be home.

Iris The Outsider

H P Lovecraft and Simon Bucher-Jones

“Wretched is she to whom memory brings only the bitter taint of lost loves and the sorrows of unhappiness. Desolate is she to whom childhood has only echoes of parties held in wastelands, and the constant mutter of the invisible sisterhood. Such a lot was mine, the lovelorn, the bittern, the twice-shy, the wallflower. (Do you see what I did there? That’s a very clever pun on bittern, a mournful calling bird, and “once bitten” which precedes twice shy.)

And yet I am strangely content and cling desperately to those memories, when my mind momentarily threatens to reach beyond to the other, and the gin and splash runs low.

I know not where, or whether I was born, save that the Castle nursery was infinitely pink and infinitely vulgar, full of stencils of passages from Mother Goose, and having high ceilings where the eye could find only mechanical mobiles that shrieked and clattered. Flabby and detestable, the pigs and sheep in these mechanical torture-devices grunted and baa-ed for the slaughter- house.

The plastic sheeting in the crumbling corridors seemed always hideously damp, and there was an accursed smell everywhere, as of the piled-up socks of dead generations. It was never light, so that I used sometimes to set fire to the curtains and gaze steadily at them for relief, nor was there any sun outdoors, since the giant and terrible toadstools, fenageek, and assorted herbs grew high above the topmost accessible towers.

There was one pink tower, curse what I now know of symbolism, which reached above the toadstool-trees into the unknown outer sky, but that was partly ruined and could not be ascended save by a well-nigh impossible climb up the sheer wall, stone by stone.

I must have lived years in this place, but I cannot measure the time. Beings must have cared for my needs, yet I cannot recall any person except myself, or anything in the form of the living, but the noiseless plush toys and cuddlies. I think that whoever nursed me must have been aged indeed, since my first conception of a living person was that of somebody mockingly like myself, yet shockingly unstylish.

To me there was nothing grotesque in the bone masks and shadow-gear that strewed some of the stone crypts deep down among the foundations, nor the rooms of costumes, and the portraits with their blank obsidian eyes. I fantastically associated these things with everyday events, and thought them more natural than the coloured pictures of living beings which I found in many of the nursery books.

From such books I learned all that I knew. No teacher urged or guided me, and I do not recall hearing any human voice in all those years—not even my own; for although I had read of speech, I had never thought to try to speak aloud, although I often tried to sing, and found the results pretty.

My aspect was a matter equally unthought of, for there were no mirrors in the castle, and I merely regarded myself by instinct as akin to the youthful figures I saw drawn and painted in the books. I felt conscious of youth because I remembered so little, and of beauty because of the ease of which I moved in my own skin, and in the tattered ball-gowns of the great wardrobes when I fancied a dress-up.

Outside, across the manicured grey-green fungus lawns and under the dark mute Toadstool trees, I would often lie and dream for hours about what I read in the books; and would longingly picture myself amidst thronging crowds in the sunny world beyond the endless forests. Once, I tried to escape from the forest, but as I went farther from the castle the shade grew denser and the air more filled with the cloying scent of lavender fear; so that I ran frantically back lest I lose my way in a labyrinth of fragrant silence.

So, through endless twilights I dreamed and waited, though I knew not what I waited for. Then in the shadowy solitude my longing for light, grew so frantic that I could rest no more, and I lifted entreating hands to the single pink tower. I resolved to scale that tower, fall though I might; since it was better to glimpse society and perish, than to live without ever beholding day.

In the dank twilight I climbed the worn and aged stone stairs till I reached the level where they ceased, and thereafter clung perilously to small footholds leading upward. Ghasdy and terrible was that dead, stairless cylinder of rock; pink, deserted, and sinisterly mottled, but ghastlier and more terrible still was the slowness of my progress; for climb as I might, the blank darkness overhead grew no thinner, and a new chill assailed me. I shivered as I wondered why I did not reach the light, and would have looked down had I dared. I fancied that night had come suddenly upon me, and vainly groped with one free hand for a window

embrasure, that I might peer out and above, and try to judge the height I had once attained.

All at once, after an infinity of awesome, sightless, crawling up that concave and desperate precipice, I felt my head touch a solid thing, and I knew I must have gained the roof, or at least some kind of floor. In the darkness I raised my free hand and tested the barrier, finding it stone and immovable. Then came a deadly circuit of the tower, clinging to whatever holds the wall could give; till finally my testing hand found the barrier yielding, and I turned upward again, pushing the slab or door with my head as I used both hands in my fearful ascent. There was no light revealed above, and as my hands went higher, I knew that my climb was for the nonce ended; since the slab was the trapdoor of an aperture leading to a level stone surface of greater circumference than the lower tower, no doubt the floor of some lofty and capacious observation chamber.

I crawled through carefully, and tried to prevent the heavy slab from falling back into place, but failed in the latter attempt. As I lay exhausted on the stone floor, I heard the eerie echoes of its fall, hoped when necessary to pry it up again.

Believing I was now at prodigious height, I dragged myself up from the floor and fumbled about for windows, that I might look for the first time upon the sky, and the moon and stars of which I had read. But, on every hand, I was disappointed; since all that I found were bulky vehicles of red, bearing numerals, and cryptic destinations in archaic lettering, as it might be, Golder's Green, Putney, Marble Arch, or most odious of all Tooting Bee. I shuddered at the image of the desolate and whistling marshland this name evoked. What these vehicles were and how they found their way, without evident wings, to abide in this high apartment so many aeons cut off from the castle below, I could not conjecture.

Then unexpectedly my hands came upon a doorway, where hung a wooden door, rough with strange markings that I could not discern in the half light. Trying it, I found it locked; but with a supreme burst of strength I overcame all obstacles and dragged it open inward. As I did so there came to me the purest ecstasy I have ever known; for shining tranquilly down in through an iron-grated door at the end of a short passage was the radiant full moon, which I had never before seen save in dreams and in vague visions I dared not call memories.

Fancying now that I had attained the very pinnacle of the castle, I commenced to move through the door; but the sudden veiling of the moon by a cloud caused me to stumble, and I felt my way more slowly in the dark. It was still very dark

when I reached the grating—which I tried carefully and found unlocked, but which I did not open for fear of falling from the amazing height to which I had climbed. Then the moon came out.

Most demoniacal of all shocks is that of the abysmally unexpected and grotesquely unbelievable. Nothing I had before undergone could compare in terror with what I now saw; with the bizarre marvels that sight implied. The sight itself was as simple as it was stupefying, for it was merely this: instead of a dizzying prospect of toadstool-treetops seen from a lofty eminence, there stretched around me on the level through the grating nothing less than the solid ground of a deserted thoroughfare.

Half unconscious, I opened the grating and staggered out upon the white pavement that stretched away in two directions. From here I could see the wide and corrugated doors through which the red vehicles would have their ingress and their exits. To open them, somehow instinctively, was the work of a moment: my mind, stunned and chaotic as it was, still held the frantic craving for light; and not even the fantastic wonder which had happened could stay my course. I neither knew nor cared whether my experience was insanity, dreaming, or magic; but was determined to gaze on brilliance and gaiety at any cost. The controls of one of the red vehicles were simplicity itself to me, and I recognised it now as being an omnibus, a device which I knew from the Latin texts in the Castle to be capable of travelling anywhere, in any manner. That this was not always true, I was to learn to my cost.

I knew not who I was or what I was, or what my surroundings might be; and consequently I wasn't the safest driver, though as I continued to roar along I became conscious of a kind of peculiar or latent memory that made my progress not wholly fortuitous. I passed under an arch that was low enough to scrape the paint off the roof, and took a corner on two wheels. Soon I was out in open country; sometimes following the visible road, but sometimes leaving it curiously to smash through haystacks and barns full of chickens. Once I swooshed across a swift river where crumbling, mossy masonry told of a bridge long vanished. I swear the wheels of the omnibus did not break the meniscus of the water.

Over two hours must have passed before I reached what seemed to be my goal, a building in a park, maddeningly familiar, yet full of perplexing strangeness to me. I saw that the Castle of my memory had obviously been burned completely to the ground and replaced, but never the less I recognised its identity at once.

But what I observed with chief interest and delight were the open windows—gorgeously ablaze with light and sending forth sound of the gayest revelry. The words of an ancient chant imploring that the brown earth mother, raise her hallowed knees, reached me.

Advancing to the windows, I looked in and saw an oddly dressed company indeed; making merry, and speaking brightly to one another. I had never, seemingly, heard human speech before and could guess only vaguely what was said. Some of the faces seemed to hold expressions that brought up incredibly remote recollections, others were utterly alien, particularly that of the white-haired man in the frilly shirt to whom I took an instinctive liking.

I now stepped through the low window into the brilliantly lighted room, stepping as I did so from my single bright moment of hope to my blackest convulsion of despair and realisation, and pausing only to brush broken glass off my dress. The nightmare was quick to come, for as I entered, there occurred immediately one of the most terrifying demonstrations I had ever conceived. Scarcely had I crossed the sill when there descended upon the whole company a sudden and unheralded fear of hideous intensity, distorting every face and evoking the most horrible screams from nearly every throat. Cries of ‘Not again,’ And ‘Who let the dog out, who, who, who, who’ resounded, although I later learned that that latter was a chorus in a popular hit of the time.

blight was universal, and in the clamour and panic several fell in a swoon and were dragged away by their madly fleeing companions. Many covered their eyes with their hands, and plunged blindly and awkwardly in their race to escape, overturning furniture and stumbling against the walls before they managed to reach one of the many doors. The cries were shocking; and as I stood in the brilliant apartment alone and dazed, listening to their vanishing echoes, I trembled at the thought of what might be lurking near me unseen. At a casual inspection, the room seemed deserted but, when I moved towards one of the alcoves, I thought I detected a presence there—but it was only a blue police-box. Then my eye fell on a hint of motion beyond the golden-arched doorway leading to another and somewhat similar room. As I approached the arch I began to perceive the presence more clearly; and then, with the first and last sound I ever uttered—a ghastly ululation that revolted me almost as poignantly as its noxious cause—I beheld in full, frightful vividness the inconceivable, indescribable, and unmentionable monstrosity which had by its simple appearance changed a merry company to a herd of delirious fugitives.

I cannot even hint what it was like, for it was a compound of all that is uncouth, shambolic, half-made up, slovenly, and detestable. It was the mutton-dressed-as-lamb shade of decay, antiquity, and dissolution; the putrid, dripping eidolon of unwholesome revelation, the awful baring of that which the merciful earth should always hide. God knows it was not of this world—or no longer of this world—yet to my horror I saw in its flea-eaten-away and corset-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape; and in its mouldy, disintegrating apparel an unspeakable quality that chilled me even more.

I was almost paralysed, but not too much so to make a feeble effort towards flight; a backward stumble which failed to break the spell in which the nameless, voiceless monster held me. My eyes bewitched by the glassy orbs which stared loathsomely into them, refused to close; though they were mercifully blurred, and showed the terrible object but indistinctly after the first shock. I tried to raise my hand to shut out the sight, yet so stunned were my nerves that my arm could not fully obey my will. The attempt, however, was enough to disturb my balance; so that I had to stagger forward several steps to avoid falling. As I did so I became suddenly and agonizingly aware of the nearness of the carrion thing, whose hideous hollow breathing I half fancied I could hear. Nearly mad, I found myself yet able to throw out a hand to ward off the foetid apparition which pressed so close; when in one cataclysmic second of cosmic nightmarishness and hellish accident my fingers touched the rotting outstretched paw of the monster beneath the golden arch.

I did not shriek, but all the fiendish ghouls that ride the night- wind shrieked for me as in that same second there crashed down upon my mind a single fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory. I knew in that second all that had been; the bloody Doctor had left me in a Confession Dial[1], with amnesia, just so I'd miss the UNIT Christmas party, but more than that I recognized, most terrible of all, the unholy abomination that stood leering before me as I withdrew my sullied fingers from its own.

But in the cosmos there is balm as well as bitterness, and that balm is strong drink, perfume, cheap sex, and sheer, sheer gall. In the supreme horror of that second, I forgot what had horrified me, and the burst of black memory vanished in a chaos of echoing images. In a dream I fled from that haunted and accursed pile, and ran swiftly and silently in the moonlight. When I returned to my bus, I realised how unerringly I had picked my true vehicle from where the Doctor had concealed it (in some puerile version of Poe's The Purloined Letter, it had

amused him to leave my time-ship in a disused bus station). Bah, I swore he'd have reasons to hate bus stations after this!

Now I ride with the windows down and friendly traffic cops wave as I steam past, and I play by day amongst the jet-set and the novae rich (and that's not only a bad pun, all the best parties are at the end of the world) yet in my new wildness and freedom I almost welcome the bitterness of alienage.

For although these things have calmed me, I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still tied to primitive ideas of fashion, beauty, and sexiness. This I have known ever since I stretched out my fingers to the abomination within that great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touched a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass.

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[1] In the original 2004 text this was not named but the technology used is now identifiable.

Lost, Presumed Illogically Ignored

Anonymous

“Typical lack of consideration,” thought Iris as she shunted the bus between a clapped-out Nissan Micra with no windscreen and a rickety pile of stacked and rusting Skodas.

Through the windows she could see an entire cityscape created from old automobiles. Tall skyscrapers of exposed engine blocks and holed exhausts towered over cottages of partially mulched soft brown leather seats, and a river of pottery-red water, sparkling with rainbow colours in the weak sun, wound its way across the muddy ground.

“Like I've got nothing better to do with my time.” she thought. "Hey Grace, have you seen my wellies?” she shouted to a blonde haired woman coming down the stairwell of the bus.

Grace shook her head and, through a mouthful of toast, said “I’m afraid not, Iris.” She peered out of one of the cracked side windows. “Are we here? Is this where the Doctor’s gone?”

“Hmm,” Iris nodded, pointing through to the cabin of the bus. “Your lighter certainly seems to think so.”

She pulled half-heartedly at a heap of discarded clothing on one seat, then stepped back as the disturbed pile slid down on top of itself in a woollen mudslide, exposing a pair of green rubber Wellington boots. “Aha! There they are,” she said, “I knew they were around somewhere.”

Iris pulled on her boots, gesturing for her companion to open the doors, then headed out into the scrapyard.

“Right then Iris, where shall we look first?” Grace asked as she caught up with Iris’ surprisingly long strides. They were walking between two hills of steering wheels, grey, brown and black primarily, but with the occasional arresting bright red or somewhat soiled white in amongst the more mundane colours. Iris stopped and pointed past the left hand, in the direction of the only building in sight. “Over there, I think,” she said, and started off towards it.

In a gloomy green-lit chamber, a black gloved hand reaches out and twists a

ruby-encrusted dial a half-turn to the right. On a screen just above, a wavy image of a man with shoulder length hair and a velvet jacket gradually solidifies. The hand extends a finger and presses down on a heavy, white switch with an audible ’click’. The image on screen disappears and is replaced by that of a young woman.

The building, up close, was a grey-white expanse of cement, embedded with small stones and with a single entrance to the front. Iris rattled the handle briefly, then wiped the rust which coated her hand onto her jacket.

She was sure she had seen a similar building somewhere else. One of those planets where there only seemed to be one bloody enormous country and where they waged war on other planets, rather than against each other. She was generally suspicious of those kinds of planets, convinced that there were actually dozens of other, possibly far nicer, countries just round the metaphorical corner and that any help she gave would be used to smash those other countries the second she was away. But she interfered in any case—it was either that or do nothing, and doing nothing was hardly an Iris thing to do.

She had in fact tried at various points to stay out of things, but without success. She was like a lazy man trying to diet by cutting down on the amount of sugar in his tea, achieving nothing beyond self-delusion. Even the time she’d spent living as a nun in a remote monastery had turned into an adventure. It’s just the way I am, she thought. I’m the pluckily inquisitive type.

"Open up in there,” she shouted, aiming another kick at the resolutely closed and barred metal door. Brightly coloured birds which had been sleeping on the roof scattered into the air as the entire building shuddered under the weight of Iris’ Wellington- encased foot. “Open the bloody door.”

“Well I don’t...” she said, turning to Grace who, on cue, blinked suddenly out of existence.

“That’s never good,” said Iris, waving her hand vaguely through the space which had, until very recently, included Grace.

She sat down on a collection of wooden beaded seat covers, and glared balefully at the closed door. “What we need,” she muttered to herself, “is a bit of a lucky break.”

She shuffled in an effort to make herself more comfortable, then had to throw both hands forward as the slippery beads rubbed against one another and caused her to slide quickly and without dignity to the ground in a cloud of dust. She lay on her back in the dirt for a moment or two, before realising that the grid which

her eyes were currently viewing without recognition could be turned into a Venetian blind covering an open window by the simple act of focusing.

"Now that's more like it," she said, reaching into her pockets for cigarettes and lighter.

Inside the building, she was unsurprised to find the Doctor's locked and apparently empty TARDIS standing in the corridor into which she had just dropped. She was more surprised still, however, to then run straight into another round the corner, and then a third in an otherwise deserted room a little further along. When she opened the next door, she came to and found herself actually in the famously roundelled console room itself, she stopped and took a seat in the wicker chair in one corner, grinding her cigarette out on the floor.

"Right then," she said loudly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are." She paused, but only briefly. "No? Right, I'll take a minute or two to get my diary up to date then." she said and, puffing on another cigarette, began to write in a notebook she pulled from her pocket.

I was relaxing in the bath when that Grace one showed up, all perfect make-up and teeth. The bus was parked in a side street in San Francisco—I've always liked California (except for the no smoking thing, obviously) and I was supposed to be meeting my friend Armistead for lunch.

I can't say I took to Grace at first though—she was far too obvious for a start. She put me in mind of that little blonde mate of the Doctor's—Jo, was that her name? A bit up front and pushy. Anyway, I was in the bath, soaking my troubles away, when I heard a knocking on the door and then—well, then I nearly died as I heard the door open.

I'd be the first to admit that my bus isn't one of those top-of-the-line, brand-spanking new models and the security isn't as good as it might be, but someone just breezing in through the front door is a bit bloody much. I was out that bath sharpish, and pulled on a dressing gown before the door downstairs had even had time to close. On the way I grabbed the baseball bat I've had on the top deck ever since those Sontarans camped out there that time I was President of Gallifrey.

I gave the bat a couple of practice swings then headed quietly for the stairs. The bus door was closed, at least, and as I moved round the bend in the stairs', I could see the back of the intruder as they crept towards the cab at the front. I was just about to sneak up and fetch them a great crack on the head when they spoke.

‘Hello? Iris? Are you there?”

“All present and correct, darling, ” I said, and had the satisfaction of seeing her—it was woman's voice—jump about six feet straight up. Friend or foe, I don't take to people just wandering about in my bus, willy-nilly. Still, she knew my name and she didn't seem much of a threat. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt, for a bit.

She soon calmed down when she realised that I wasn't going to bash her head in, so I gave her a drink, got her sat down and gently grilled her as to the whys and wherefores of her unexpected visit chez Iris.

‘I believe we have a mutual friend, ” she said. ‘The Doctor?”

Well, my hearts skipped a beat or two, I can tell you. I hadn't heard that name spoken aloud (except in my own muttered laments) for decades. I'd not seen him since that time we were down a rather dark and dangerous mine, in that escapade with the Daleks. We'd put our heads together and won the day, of course, but just when I thought we might, finally, be getting a little closer, he'd wandered off round a comer and that was the last I'd seen of him. Since then I'd heard that he'd gone a bit strange, calling himself ‘Time's Champion” if you can believe it. And if that's not self aggrandisement, I don't know what is. But once upon a time, we'd been good friends—and more than that. He'd asked me to marry him on more than one occasion, and of course we'd...well, some things are maybe best not gone into.

Anyhow, that put Grace in an altogether better light—any friend of the Doctor (well, except for that Jo Grant piece) was a friend of mine, so I topped up her G&T with the Bombay Sapphire rather than the Tesco's Own Brand, and told her to tell me the entire story.

“I'm tempted,” he’d said, which—Grace thought later—was all very well, but didn't actually mean anything, and probably wasn’t true. Even their kiss, she’d come to believe, was the consequence of a brief adrenaline rush on his part or, worst of all, her reward for a job well done.

She was happy to admit to herself that she had been caught up in the moment (there had been fireworks, for God's sake) and that it had seemed like the perfect bitter-sweet ending. In retrospect though, dissecting everything they had said to one another, it did hurt how quickly he’d dismissed her when she said that she’d miss him.

“I’m the guy with two hearts,” he’d replied; a fact which apparently made him easier to find.

What a crock.

But she'd been dumped far less romantically over the years, and so she eventually got over it and on with her life.

It was a little humdrum working as *a* doctor, having met the definitive article, but she told herself that she'd only known him for a day or so out of a life of thousands of days; in the end the whole thing had started to appear more and more unreal.

She'd mentioned bits of it to various people, and all of them had looked at her strangely and then pointed out the many points at which her tale collapsed under the weight of its own lack of internal logic, or where her account just didn't fit with what was known of the universe. She'd even seen a shrink for a month or two, but when he suggested that the whole thing was just a dream, she'd finally thrown her hands in the air and pushed the entire thing to the back of her mind. She'd started dating a nurse from the hospital, got a tattoo and a delicate silver nose-ring, bought herself one of the new Beetles; moved on.

And one evening about two years later, he had appeared at the door of her apartment, taken her hand and placed it on first one, then the other, side of his chest.

"Hello Grace," he'd said. "Check the hearts," he'd smiled, but uneasily, and he'd shut the door behind himself too quickly.

She'd steered him into the kitchen where he'd immediately gone over and closed the blinds. "I'm being followed," he'd said anxiously. His hands were shaking around the mug of tea she'd given him, and his eyes were red with lack of sleep. "They've taken the TARDIS from me, Grace. It's gone."

Grace tried to ask who had taken his ship, but he was already on his feet, pulling bits and pieces of collected detritus from his pockets. "It's in here somewhere," he muttered to himself, depositing an apple on top of what was an obviously unsteady pile.

"Aha! Here it is," he said, and handed Grace a small black plastic object, shaped like a cheap cigarette lighter. "Press the switch thing on the side and it beeps if the TARDIS is nearby," he said. "I've got one too. That's what I need your help for. I need you to go one way and I'll go the other and between us we'll find the old girl."

He smiled again, this time with slightly more conviction. "Come on Grace," he chivvied her, "let's go."

In the street outside her apartment, he turned slowly round, then beckoned her

closer.

“I know the TARDIS is in San Francisco,” he explained, “but nothing more precise than that. I thought if we took opposite directions and just walked around until one of us got a signal, we should soon find her.”

Grace nodded, although in truth the Doctor’s plan seemed somewhat short on detail. “I’ll go this way then,” she said and started off down the left hand path. She hadn’t even managed to get to the turn in the road when she heard a muffled cry from behind her and spun round just in time to see everything around the Doctor freeze in place. Immediately behind him, a man placed a foot down on the ground and then stopped, swaying slightly in the wind. The Doctor himself paused for a second and then disappeared, though not before mouthing, "Iris can help...her bus...nearby.”

In the background, the frozen man unfroze and moved off, leaving Grace alone in the street.

"And so I’ve walked around the city for hours, until I saw your bus parked,” Grace said, finishing the last of her drink.

I have to admit that I was quite pleased to hear that the Doctor had thought of me in his time of trouble. OK, maybe it wasn’t the same as having him sweep me off my feet and carry me in his strong arms to whatever passed for the bedroom in his TARDIS, but it was a start.

"Let’s see the tracking thingy then, dear,” I said, holding out my hand.

Viewed close up it did look exactly like the Bic I use for my ciggies, but I could see that it would plug nicely into a small indentation in the cab of my bus —an indentation I’d never been able to figure out and which, up until now, I’d always used as a handy ashtray. When I slotted it in though, a light flickered on just above the steering wheel and the bus began to moan and groan like it did when it wanted to get moving. “Nothing ventured,” I said to no-one in particular and disengaged the metaphorical handbrake.

Iris stretched on the wicker chair and closed her notebook.

“Right then, if Mohammed won’t come to the mountain,” she muttered.

“This is just stupid,” she continued, as she pressed a series of buttons on the TARDIS console in the centre of the room. Each button she pushed clicked, whistled or beeped and a variety of red and blue lights blinked on and off following each action. Beyond that, however, nothing happened.

“Thought so,” Iris said, “This isn't his TARDIS at all.”

She looked up at the ceiling of the room and waved at a camera high in one corner. “Hey you, whoever you are. I know this is a fake, you know. I was in the Doctor’s TARDIS during that do with the green lad, and this isn't it.”

She paused for a minute, head cocked to one side like an inquisitive puppy. “No?” she asked the world in general. “Fine then, let’s go have a look at the others.”

In the corridor outside, Iris placed a hand softly on the outer shell of the first TARDIS she came to, the blue box topped in this case by a peaked roof. I thought his chameleon circuit didn’t work, she thought. The ostentatious old fraud, he just likes the look of the thing.

She stepped back, apparently considering something profound, then took two steps forward and gave the doors to the TARDIS a heavy kick. With a loud slapping noise, the entire structure collapsed in on itself in an avalanche of chipboard and tacks, and crashed to the floor.

"Do I need to do them all?” she asked a camera which slowly turned towards her.

On a small flickering screen embedded in a green wall, Iris can be indistinctly seen, underneath the reflected image of the watcher’s own face. “Apparently you are not so stupid as you appear, Ms Wildthyme,” the watcher says. He stretches down to a button just under the screen and presses it.

[CAMERA 1]

A door slides open in a wall. Iris is framed by the new doorway, idly kicking the remains of the mock TARDIS. She looks up at the sound of the door, says something which cannot be heard (the recording is visual only, and that grainy and indistinct), and moves through the door.

[CAMERA 2]

Iris moves into a dark room with green walls, empty apart from another open door directly ahead.

[CAMERA 1]

Iris’ back can be seen passing crossing the room and entering the next.

[CAMERA 2]

A door closing.

[CAMERA 3]

A dark space, briefly illuminated by an open door, through which Iris enters, then plunged into total darkness as the door closes behind her.

Hours I sat there in that bloody room in the dark. Well, I say room but I mean corridor, because that's all it was—a short corridor between two other rooms. Some bugger lured me in, then switched off the lights and locked the doors. Well, I'm not so easily defeated. The Doctor would, no doubt, have jemmied part of the wall away and exposed miles of cables which he'd then have twisted and pulled for a minute or two until the doors shot open. Not me, though—I just had a bit of a nap and waited for whoever it was to let me out.

Sure enough, a couple of hours later, the far door slid open and I could see this green cave through it. Power napping—it outwits the bad guys every time.

"Ms Wildthyme," said the black-clad figure, stepping out from behind his dais as Iris wandered in, looking around inquisitively all the while. "I certainly did not expect to see you."

Iris looked up at the familiar voice. "Here—I thought you were dead!"

"Not at all, my dear Iris—I may call you Iris? Rumours of my demise have been, as ever, grossly exaggerated." He nodded, swept a hand round the room. "Welcome to my Verdigris chamber."

"What?" asked Iris, trying to place the unfamiliar word, "Whale sperm?"

She walked towards what she presumed was the Doctor's captor. "Where's the Doctor then?" she said.

"Come now Iris," he said as he backed away, "you are not that stupid—you surely cannot expect me simply to blurt out my plans to you?" He pulled a small black pistol from his pocket. "I had intended to renew my regenerative cycle by stealing this particular Doctor's life essence and adding it to what is left of my own. After all, hardly anyone knows about this one. This is the secret Doctor, the Doctor known to only the chosen few. This Doctor cannot be quickly sketched in chalky outline, the original, the tramp, the dandy—you know the list. This one will not be missed, trust me."

He shifted the pistol in his hand. "And now I have your own potent, if mongrel, blood to add to the mix, dear Iris."

When he smiled, the tips of his teeth showed very slightly between his lips, and his cheekbones became somewhat unexpectedly accented. He smiled now,

and mouthed, silently, a single word to Iris.

"Bye-ee."

The next few moments were confused.

The gun in his hand fired, but Iris was no longer there, was no longer in the room at all, in fact. Instead a shimmering light gently faded in the place in which she had stood. The man spun round on his heel, checking each corner in turn, the gun extended poker- straight in front of him. The air shimmered once more, this time around his hand and when it had dissipated, the gun too had gone. In a rush of tripping feet and skinned hands, the man stumbled and ran to flick a switch at the rear of the room. A second door slid up and into the wall, revealing two scratched plastic, human shaped moulds. Both were empty, and there was a lingering taste of ozone and a few fading sparkles in the air. The man slumped to the ground. "You're kidding," he said, under his breath, as armed men ran in through the other door and surrounded him.

Later, Iris sat in the bus with Grace and the Doctor, taking large gulps of her gin and tonic.

"So, it wasn't hard to get you back at all. There *are* laws, you know, and being a madman with a penchant for black velvet and one very small gun doesn't make you immune to them."

"You called the Police?" the Doctor asked, still incredulous. "That's all?"

"Well I had to find you first and pinpoint your exact location for Blandish and his transporter thingy. It wasn't as easy as all that." Iris sat back on her chair and tried her best to look indignant, but the presence of the Doctor in her bus always made her happiest, and so she smiled at him instead.

"I don't think I've ever even considered just phoning the Police, you know," said the Doctor thoughtfully.

"And you living where you do, as well," Iris laughed.

As Iris went to re-fill her glass and the Doctor settled back in his chair, Grace stood at one of the windows and wondered when they would get round to taking her home.

Outside the window, she could see the swirling of the Vortex and, somewhere in the distance, bright lights like fireworks going off.

The Key Lime Pie 2 Time - "The Stones of Blood"

Cody Schell

Iris, Senor 105 and Panda had just climbed back aboard the b after finding the 3rd piece of the Celestial Gatto, which this time took the form of slices of a key lime pie. The three of them had just narrow escaped vampiric versions of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. (Honestly, they looked somewhat more life-like than the real Rolling Stones these days.)

"I knew there was a reason they hated citrus!" Panda threw himself onto the chaise, almost knocking over the Ormolu clock. The Ormolu clock that was already broken from having been knocked over multiple times. Plus, it had melted numbers. He didn't understand why Iris kept half the junk she did. "That's half of the dratted Celestial thingee done then!" Today of all days he didn't want to spend running around helping Iris on a mission for someone else.

"It was bad enough trying to find the pieces the first time 'round, now they've sent me off to do it again in an ill-advised sequel!" Iris put her hand on 105's bicep. The luchador was holding on to one of the "oh-shit" straps that hung from a metal pole that ran the length of the bus. "At least the first piece was disguised as a sculpture in your mysterious colonial-style house, Senor. It gave me a chance to visit you again, lovey. And for you to come traveling with me on the bus!"

"I'm happy to see you again as well, Senora," smiled 105.

"I thought you were... or is that a gun in your pocket?" giggled Iris.

105 nervously brushed some imaginary dust from various areas of his maroon suit and tie, and readjusted his fedora. "You know I never carry a gun." He smirked and pulled her closer.

"DISGUSTING!" Panda bellowed, pretending to be reading an art magazine. Then covering for his outburst: "They call that minimalism? PAH!" He threw the magazine down. "I'm going upstairs, I need to do some meditation."

Iris and 105 waited until they knew Panda was upstairs and quickly got down to business. "Right chuck, we've got to make this fast...and make sure he doesn't hear us!!"

Panda pretended he couldn't hear the scuffling and banging downstairs and Iris shushing 105 theatrically, followed by the occasional giggle. He was about to play "Some Velvet Morning" at top volume when he heard Iris and 105 come stumbling up the stairs.

"This bus is crowded enough, why don't you two go get a room somewhere, you selfish..."

Iris and 105 stood together at the top of the stairs holding a lovingly-frosted Bamboo Upside-down Cake with the words "Happy Birthday Panda" on it. Iris had jammed various tacky brooches onto the cake's surface as improvised decoration.

"...selfish..." Panda was at a loss for words.

"Happy Birthday, lovey!! Did we surprise you?"

105 scratched Panda's ears. "Feliz Cumpleanos, Osito!"

Soon everyone had huge mouthfuls of cake and frosting. They were all hungry after being chased by a wraith-like Ron Wood. "It turns out he was just after me bottle of gin, the old boozehound! He could have cared less about the Celestial Gatto slice!"

"Speaking of slices, Senora, aren't you going to eat yours?" 105 pointed at the piece of cake he'd cut for her, wiping green frosting off his purple leather mask. Under his fedora, Iris could just barely read the large "40" on his "Zirconium" mask. He'd flipped his tie back over his shoulder so he wouldn't get any stains on it.

"Thanks love, but I have to finish this one first." Her eyes were shut in delight, savouring the dessert.

Panda set down his fork gingerly. "But Iris... only three slices have been cut. If we each have a slice, and there's another on the table..."

Iris' jaw froze in place. Her eyes snapped open, glowing a terrible, searing orange.

"Oh bugger."

The End

You have been reading

In the Sixties, **Cabinet of Changes** and **Iris Wildthyme and the Spiders from Magrs** were first published in *Walking in Eternity,* ed. Jay Eales.

Entertaining Mr O was first published in *Perfect Timing*, eds. Mark Phippen and Helen Fayle.

It's Raining Again was first published in *Perfect Timing 2,* eds. Helen Fayle and Mark Phippen.

The Amazing Adventures of Iris Wildthyme on Neptune was first published in *Tales of the Solar System,* ed. Paul Griggs.

An Unearthly Palaver was originally commissioned for the *G'day,for the Doctor* convention.

Hospitality was first published in *Iris: Abroad,* ed. Stuart Douglas.

Deleted Scene from The Key Lime Pie 2 Time was first published as an ebook only extra to *Iris: Abroad,* ed. Stuart Douglas.

Iris Explains was first published in *Missing Pieces,* eds. Shaun Lyon and Mark Phippen.

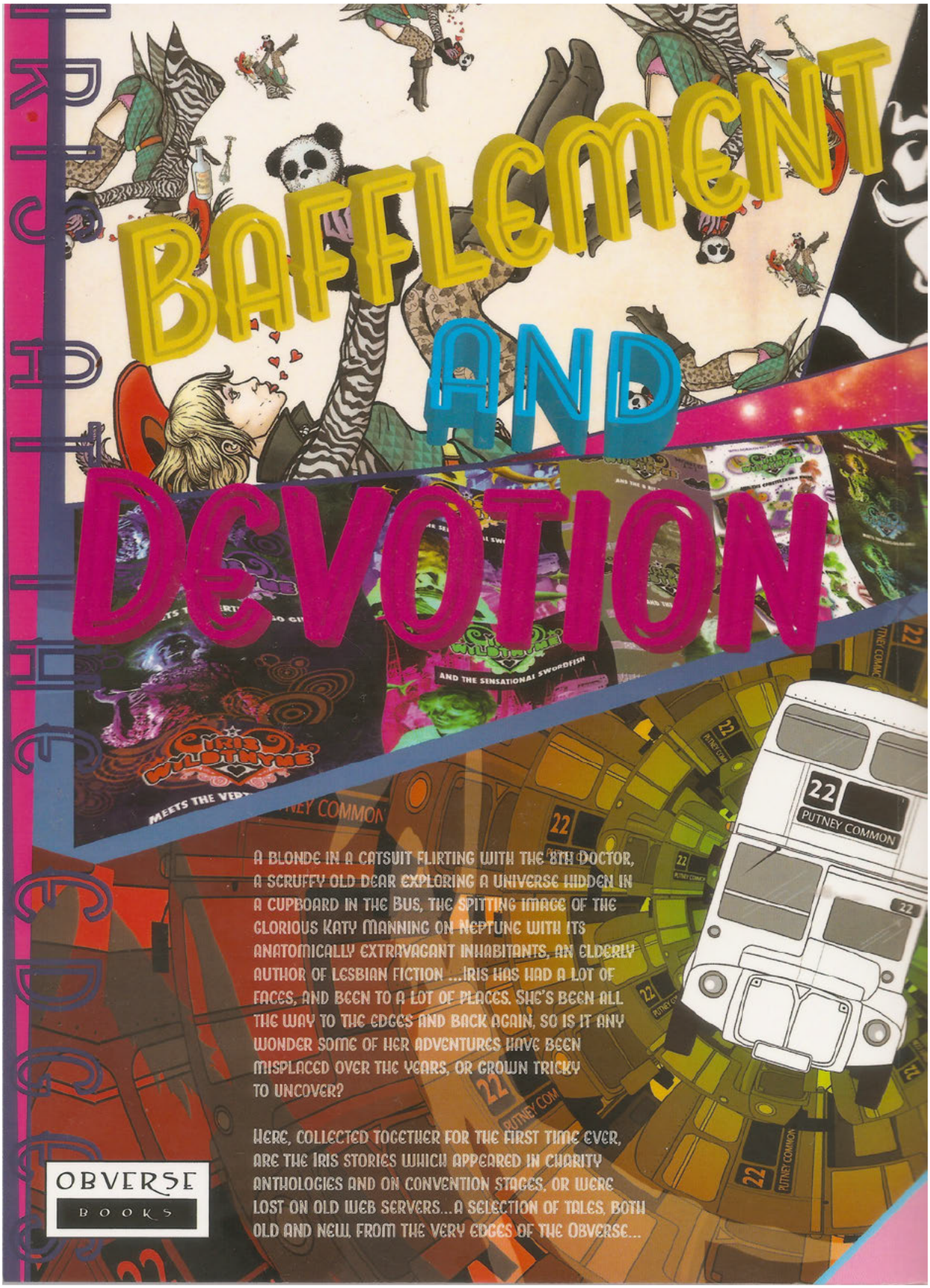
A World Apart, **Faking It** and **Iris the Outsider** were first published on the *Iris Wildthyme Pages* website.

No Place like Home was first published in *Shelf Life,* eds. Jay Eales, Adrian Sherlock and David Mclntee.

Lost, Presumed Illogically Ignored was found on an abandoned FTP server.

When Iris Met Billy was first published in *A Second Target for Tommy*

BAFFLEMENT AND DEVOTION



A BLONDE IN A CATSUIT FLIRTING WITH THE 8TH DOCTOR, A SCRUFFY OLD DEAR EXPLORING A UNIVERSE HIDDEN IN A CUPBOARD IN THE BUS, THE SPITTING IMAGE OF THE GLORIOUS KATY MANNING ON NEPTUNE WITH ITS ANATOMICALLY EXTRAVAGANT INHABITANTS, AN ELDERLY AUTHOR OF LESBIAN FICTION ...IRIS HAS HAD A LOT OF FACES, AND BEEN TO A LOT OF PLACES. SHE'S BEEN ALL THE WAY TO THE EDGES AND BACK AGAIN, SO IS IT ANY WONDER SOME OF HER ADVENTURES HAVE BEEN MISPLACED OVER THE YEARS, OR GROWN TRICKY TO UNCOVER?

HERE, COLLECTED TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, ARE THE IRIS STORIES WHICH APPEARED IN CHARITY ANTHOLOGIES AND ON CONVENTION STAGES, OR WERE LOST ON OLD WEB SERVERS...A SELECTION OF TALES, BOTH OLD AND NEW, FROM THE VERY EDGES OF THE OBVERSE...

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